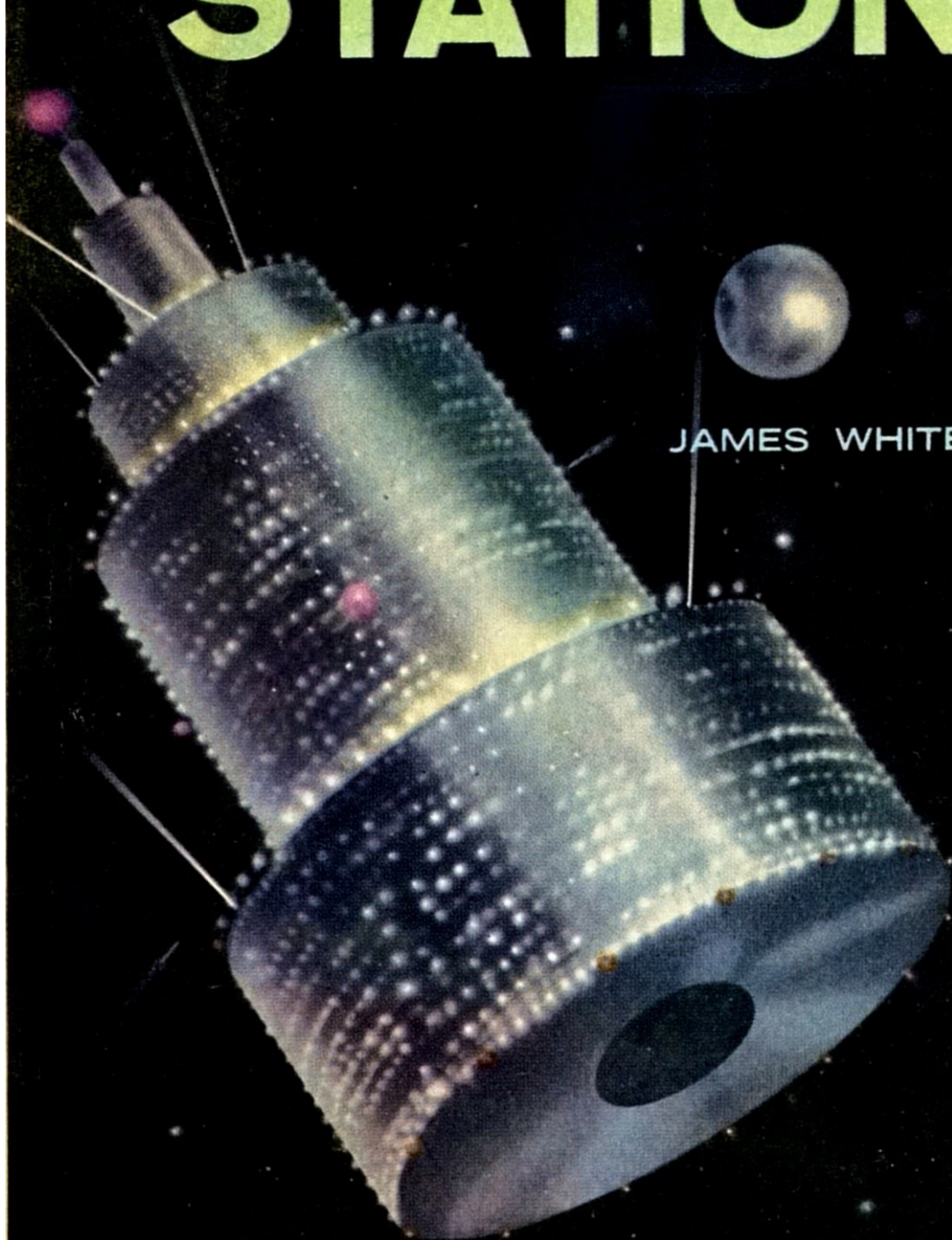


HOSPITAL STATION

JAMES WHITE



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1962

Part One

Medic

THE ALIEN occupying O'Mara's sleeping compartment weighed roughly half a ton, possessed six short, thick appendages which served both as arms or legs and had a hide like flexible armour plate. Coming as it did from Hudlar, a four-G world with an atmospheric pressure nearly seven times Earth normal, such ruggedness of physique was to be expected. But despite its enormous strength the being was helpless, O'Mara knew, because it was barely six months old, it had just seen its parents die in a construction accident, and its brain was sufficiently well developed for the sight to have frightened it badly.

"I've b-b-brought the kid," said Waring, one of the section's tractor-beam operators. He hated O'Mara, and with good

reason, but he was trying not to gloat. "C-C-Caxton sent me. He says your leg makes you unfit for normal duty, so you can look after the young one until somebody arrives from its home planet. He's on his way over n-now..."

Waring trailed off. He began checking the seals of his spacesuit, obviously in a hurry to get out before O'Mara could mention the accident. "I brought some of its food with me," he ended quickly. "It's in the airlock."

O'Mara nodded without speaking. He was a young man cursed with the kind of physique which insured him winning every fight he had ever been in, and there had been a great many of them recently, and a face which was as square, heavy and roughly formed as was his over-muscled body. He knew that if he allowed himself to show how much that accident had affected

him, Waring would think that he was simply putting on an act. Men who were put together as he was, O'Mara had long ago discovered, were not supposed to have any of the softer emotions.

Immediately Waring departed he went to the airlock for the glorified paint-sprayer with which Hudlarians away from their home planet were fed. While checking the gadget and its spare food tanks he tried to go over the story he would have to tell Caxton when the section chief arrived. Staring moodily through the airlock port at the bits and pieces of the gigantic jigsaw puzzle spread across fifty cubic miles of space outside, he tried to think. But his mind kept ducking away from the accident and slipping instead into generalities and events which were in the far past or future.

The vast structure which was slowly taking

shape in Galactic Sector Twelve, midway between the rim of the parent galaxy and the densely populated systems of the Greater Magellanic Cloud, was to be a hospital – a hospital to end all hospitals. Hundreds of different environments would be accurately reproduced here, any extreme of heat, cold, pressure, gravity, radiation or atmosphere necessary for the patients and staff it would contain. Such a tremendous and complex structure was far beyond the resources of any one planet, so that hundreds of worlds had each fabricated sections of it and transported them to the assembly point.

But fitting the jigsaw together was no easy job.

Each of the worlds concerned had their copies of the master plan. But errors occurred despite this – probably through

the plan having to be translated into so many different languages and systems of measurement. Sections which should have fitted snugly together very often had to be modified to make them join properly, and this necessitated moving the sections together and apart several times with massed tractor and pressor beams. This was very tricky work for the beam operators, because while the weight of the sections out in space was nil, their mass and inertia was tremendous.

And anyone unlucky enough to be caught between the joining faces of two sections in the process of being fitted became, no matter how tough a life-form they happened to be, an almost perfect representation of a two-dimensional body.

The beings who had died belonged to a tough species, physiological classification

FROB to be exact. Adult Hudlarians weighed in the region of two Earth tons, possessed an incredibly hard but flexible tegument which, as well as protecting them from their own native and external pressures, allowed them to live and work comfortably in any atmosphere of lesser pressure down to and including the vacuum of space. In addition they had the highest radiation tolerance level known, which made them particularly invaluable during power pile assembly.

The loss of two such valuable beings from his section would, in any case, have made Caxton mad, quite apart from other considerations. O'Mara sighed heavily, decided that his nervous system demanded a more positive release than that, and swore. Then he picked up the feeder and returned to the bedroom.

Normally the Hudlarians absorbed food directly through their skin from the thick, soupy atmosphere of their planet, but on any other world or in space a concentrated food compound had to be sprayed onto the absorbent hides at certain intervals. The young E-T was showing large bare patches and in other places the previous food coating had worn very thin. Definitely, thought O'Mara, the infant was due for another feed. He moved as close as seemed safe and began to spray carefully.

The process of being painted with food seemed to be a pleasant one for the young FROB. It ceased to cower in the corner and began blundering excitedly about the small bedroom. For O'Mara it became a matter of trying to hit a rapidly moving object while practising violent evasive manoeuvres himself, which set his injured leg throbbing more painfully than ever. His furniture

suffered, too.

Practically the whole interior surface of his bleeping compartment was covered with the sticky, sharp-smelling food compound, and also the exterior of the now-quiescent young alien, when Caxton arrived.

"What's going on?" said the Section Chief.

Space construction men as a class were simple, uncomplicated personalities whose reactions were easily predictable. Caxton was the type who always asked what was going on even when, as now, he knew — and especially when such unnecessary questions were meant simply to needle somebody. In the proper circumstances the section chief was probably a quite likeable individual, O'Mara thought, but between Caxton and himself those circumstances

had yet to come about.

O'Mara answered the question without showing the anger he felt, and ended, "...After this I think I'll keep the kid in space, and feed it there..."

"You will not!" Caxton snapped. "You'll keep it here with you, all the time. But more about that later. At the moment I want to know about the accident. Your side of it, that is."

His expression said that he was prepared to listen, but that he already doubted every word that O'Mara would say in advance.

"Before you go any further," Caxton broke in after O'Mara had completed two sentences, "you know that this project is under Monitor Corps jurisdiction. Usually

the Monitors let us settle any trouble that crops up in our own way, but this case involves extra-terrestrials and they'll have to be brought in on it. There'll be an investigation."

He tapped the small, flat box hanging from his chest. "It's only fair to warn you that I'm taping everything you say." O'Mara nodded and began giving his account of the accident in a low monotone. It was a very weak story, he knew, and stressing any particular incident so as to point it up in his favour would make it sound even more artificial. Several times Caxton opened his mouth to speak, but thought better of it. Finally he said: "But did anyone see you doing these things? Or even see the two E-Ts moving about in the danger area while the warning lights were burning? You have a neat little story to explain this madness on their part – which, incidentally, makes

you quite a hero – but it could be that you switched on the lights *after* the accident, that it was your negligence regarding the lights which caused it, and that all this about the straying youngster is a pack of lies designed to get you out of a very serious charge – "

"Waring saw me," O'Mara cut in.

Caxton stared at him intently, his expression changing from suppressed anger to one of utter disgust and scorn. Despite himself O'Mara felt his face heating up.

"Waring, eh?" said the section chief tonelessly. "A nice touch, that. You know, and we all know, that you have been riding Waring constantly, needling him and playing on his disability to such an extent that he must hate you like poison. Even if

he did see you, the court would expect him to keep quiet about it. And if he did not see you, they would think that he had and was keeping quiet about it anyway. O'Mara, you make me sick.", Caxton wheeled and stamped towards the airlock. With one foot through the inner seal he turned again.

"You're nothing but a trouble-maker, O'Mara," he said angrily, "a surly, quarrelsome lump of bone and muscle with just enough skill to make you worth keeping. You may think that it was technical ability which got you these quarters on your own. It wasn't, you're good but not that good! The truth is that nobody else in my section would share accommodation with you..."

The section chief's hand moved to the cut-off switch on his recorder. His voice, as he ended, became a quiet, deadly thing.

"And O'Mara, if you let any harm come to that youngster, if anything happens to it at all, the Monitors won't even get the chance to try you."

The implications behind those final words were clear, O'Mara thought angrily as the section chief left; he was sentenced to live with this organic half-ton tank for a period that would feel like eternity no matter how short it was. Everybody knew that exposing Hudlarians to space was like putting a dog out for the night – there were no harmful effects at all. But what some people knew and what they felt were two vastly different things and O'Mara was dealing here with the personalities of simple, uncomplicated, over-sentimental and very angry construction men.

When he had joined the project six months

before, O'Mara found that he was doomed again to the performance of a job which, while important in itself, gave him no satisfaction and was far below his capabilities. Since school his life had been a series of such frustrations. Personnel officers could not believe that a young man with such square, ugly features and shoulders so huge that his head looked moronically small by comparison could be interested in *subtle* subjects like psychology or electronics. He had gone into space in the hope of finding things different, but no. Despite constant efforts during interviews to impress people with his quite considerable knowledge, they were too dazzled by his muscle-power to listen, and his applications were invariably stamped "Approved Suitable for Heavy, Sustained Labour."

On joining this project he had decided to

make the best of what promised to be another boring, frustrating job – he decided to become an unpopular character. As a result his life had been anything but boring. But now he was wishing that he had not been so successful at making himself disliked.

What he needed most at this moment was friends, and he hadn't A single one.

O'Mara's mind was dragged back from the dismal past to the even less pleasant present by the sharp all-pervading odour, of the Hudlarian's food compound. Something would have to be done about that, and quickly. He hurriedly got into his lightweight suit and went through the lock.

Chapter Two

His living quarters were in a tiny sub-assembly which would one day form the theatre, surgical ward and adjoining storage compartments of the hospital's low-gravity MSVK section. Two small rooms with a connecting section of corridor had been pressurised and fitted with artificial gravity grids for O'Mara's benefit, the rest of the structure remaining both airless and weightless. He drifted along short, unfinished corridors whose ends were open to space, staring into the bare, angular compartments which slid past. They were all full of trailing plumbing and

half-built machinery the purpose of which it was impossible to guess without actually taking an MSVK educator tape. But all the compartments he examined were either too small to hold the alien or they were open in one direction to space. O'Mara swore with restraint but great feeling, pushed himself out to one of the ragged edges of his tiny domain and glared around him.

Above, below and all around him out to a distance of ten miles floated pieces of hospital, invisible except for the bright blue lights scattered over them as a warning to ship traffic in the area. It was a little like being at the centre of a dense globular star cluster, O'Mara thought, and rather beautiful if you were in a mood to appreciate it. He wasn't, because on most of those floating sub-assemblies there were pressor-beam men on watch, placed

there to fend off sections which threatened to collide. These men would see and report it to Caxton if O'Mara took his baby alien outside even for feeding.

The only answer apparently, he told himself disgustedly as he retraced his way, was nose-plugs.

Inside the lock he was greeted by a noise like a tinny foghorn. It blared out in long, discordant blasts with just enough interval in between to make him dread the arrival of the next one. Investigation revealed bare patches of hide showing through the last coat of food, so presumably his little darling was hungry again. O'Mara went for the sprayer.

When he had about three square yards covered there was an interruption. Dr.

Pelling arrived.

The project doctor took off his helmet and gauntlets only, flexed the stiffness out of his fingers and growled, "I believe you hurt your leg. Let's have a look."

Pelling could not have been more gentle as he explored O'Mara's injured leg, but what he was doing was plainly a duty rather than an act of friendship. His voice was reserved as he said, "Severe bruising and a couple of pulled tendons is all – you were lucky. Rest. I'll give you some stuff to rub on it. Have you been redecorating?"

"What...?" began O'Mara, then saw where the doctor was looking. "That's food compound. The little so-and-so kept moving while I was spraying it. But speaking of the youngster, can you tell

me-

"No, I can't," said Pelling. "My brain is overloaded enough with the ills and remedies of my own species without my trying to stuff it with FROB physiology tapes. Besides, they're tough – nothing *can* happen to them!" He sniffed loudly and made a face. "Why don't you keep it outside?"

"Certain people are too soft-hearted," O'Mara replied bitterly. "They are horrified by such apparent cruelties as lifting kittens by the scruff of the neck..."

"Humph," said the doctor, looking almost sympathetic. "Well, that's your problem. See you in a couple of weeks."

"Wait!" O'Mara called urgently, hobbling after the doctor with one empty trouser leg

flapping. "What if something does happen? And there has to be rules about the care and feeding of these things, simple rules. You can't just leave me to... to..."

"I see what you mean," said Pelling. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then went on, "There's a book kicking around my place somewhere, a sort of Hudlarian first aid handbook. But it's printed in Universal..."

"I read Universal," said O'Mara.

Pelling looked surprised. "Bright boy. All right, I'll send it over." He nodded curtly and left.

O'Mara closed the bedroom door in the hope that this might cut down the intensity of the food smell, then lowered himself carefully into the living room couch for what

he told himself was a well-deserved rest. He settled his leg so that it ached almost comfortably and began trying to talk himself into an acceptance of the situation. The best he could achieve was a seething, philosophical calm.

But he was so weary that even the effort of feeling angry became too much for him. His eyelids dropped and a warm deadness began creeping up from his hands and feet. O'Mara sighed, wriggled, and prepared to sleep...

The sound which blasted him out of his couch had the strident, authoritative urgency of all the alarm sirens that ever were and a volume which threatened to blow the bedroom door off its runners. O'Mara grabbed instinctively for his spacesuit, dropped it with a curse as he realised what was happening, then went for

the sprayer.

Junior was hungry again...! During the eighteen hours which followed it was brought home to O'Mara how much he did not know about infant Hudlarians. He had spoken many times to its parents via Translator, and the baby had been mentioned often, but somehow they had not spoken of the important things. Sleep, for instance.

Judging from recent observation and experience, infant FROBs did not sleep. In the all too short intervals between feeds they blundered around the bedroom smashing all items of furniture which were not metal and bolted down – and these they bent beyond recognition or usefulness – or they huddled in a corner knotting and unknotting their tentacles. Probably this sight of a baby doing the equivalent of

playing with its fingers would have brought coos of delight from an adult Hudlarian, but it merely made O'Mara sick and crosseyed.

And every two hours, plus or minus a few minutes, he had to feed the brute. If he was lucky it lay quiet, but more often he had to chase it around with the sprayer. Normally FROBs of this age were too weak to move about — but that was under Hudlar's crushing gravity-pull and pressure. Here in conditions which were to it less than one quarter-G, the infant Hudlarian could move. And it was having fun.

O'Mara wasn't: his body felt like a thick, clumsy sponge saturated with fatigue. After each feed he dropped onto the couch and let his bone-weary body dive blindly into unconsciousness. He was so utterly and completely spent, he told himself after every spraying, that he could not possibly

hear the brute the next time it complained — he would be too deeply out. But always that blaring, discordant foghorn jerked him at least half awake and sent him staggering like a drunken puppet through the motions which would end that horrible, mind-wrecking din.

After nearly thirty hours of it O'Mara knew he couldn't take much more. Whether the infant was collected in two days or two months the result as far as he was concerned would be the same; he would be a raving lunatic. Unless in a weak moment he took a walk outside without his suit. Felling would never have allowed him to be subjected to this sort of punishment, he knew, but the doctor was an ignoramus where the FROB life-form was concerned. And Caxton, only a little less ignorant, was the simple, direct type who delighted in this sort of violent practical joke, especially

when he considered that the victim deserved everything he got.

But just suppose the section chief was a more devious character than O'Mara had suspected? Suppose he knew exactly what he was sentencing him to by leaving the infant Hudlarian in his charge? O'Mara cursed tiredly, but he had been at it so constantly for the last ten or twelve hours that bad language had ceased to be an emotional safety valve. He shook his head angrily in a vain attempt to dispel the weariness which clogged his brain.

Caxton wasn't going to get away with it.

He was the strongest man on the whole project, O'Mara knew, and his reserves of strength must be considerable. All this fatigue and nervous twitching was simply in

his mind, he told himself insistently, and a couple of days with practically no sleep meant nothing to his tremendous physique – even after the shaking up he'd received in the accident. And anyway, the present situation with the infant couldn't get any worse, so it must soon begin to improve. He would beat them yet, he swore. Caxton would not drive him mad, or even to the point of calling for help.

This was a challenge, he insisted with weary determination. Up to now he had bemoaned the fact that no job had fully exploited his capabilities. Well, this was a problem which would tax both his physical stamina and deductive processes to the limit. An infant had been placed in his charge and he intended taking care of it whether it was here for two weeks or two months. What was more, he was going to see that the kid was a credit to him when

its foster parents arrived...

After, the forty-eighth hour of the infant FROB's company and the fifty-seventh since he had had a good sleep, such illogical and somewhat maudlin thinking did not seem strange to O'Mara at all.

Then abruptly there came a change in what O'Mara had accepted as the order of things. The FROB after complaining, was fed, and refused to shut up!

O'Mara's first reaction was a feeling of hurt surprise; this was against the *rules*. They cried, you fed them, they stopped crying — at least for a while. This was so unfair that it left him too shocked and helpless to react.

The noise was bedlam, with variations.

Long, discordant blasts of sound beat over him. Sometimes the pitch and volume varied in an insanely arbitrary manner and at others it had a grinding, staccato quality as if broken glass had got into its vocal gears. There were intervals of quiet, varying between two seconds and half a minute, during which O'Mara cringed waiting for the next blast. He stuck it out for as long as he could – a matter of ten minutes or so – then he dragged his leaden body off the couch again.

"What the blazes is *wrong* with you?" O'Mara roared against the din. The FROB was thoroughly covered by food compound so it couldn't be hungry.

Now that the infant had seen him the volume and urgency of its cries increased. The external, bellows-like flap of muscle on the infant's back – used for sound

production only, the FROBs being non-breathers — continued swelling and deflating rapidly. O'Mara jammed the palms of his hands against his ears, an action which did no good at all, and yelled, "*Shut up!*" He knew that the recently orphaned Hudlarian must still be feeling confused and frightened, that the mere process of feeding it could not possibly fulfil all of its emotional needs — he knew all this and felt a deep pity for the being. But these feelings were in some quiet, sane and civilised portion of his mind and divorced from all the pain and weariness and frightful onslaughts of sound currently torturing his body. He was really two people, and while one of him knew the reason for the noise and accepted it, the other — the purely physical O'Mara — reacted instinctively and viciously to stop it.

"Shut up! SHUT UP!" screamed O'Mara,

and started swinging with his fists and feet.

Miraculously, after about ten minutes of it, the Hudlarian stopped crying.

O'Mara returned to the couch shaking. For those ten minutes he had been in the grip of a murderous, uncontrollable rage. He had punched and kicked savagely until the pain from his hands and injured leg forced him to stop using those members, but he had gone on kicking and screeching invective with the only other weapons left to him, his good leg and tongue. The sheer viciousness of what he had done shocked and sickened him.

It was no good telling himself that the Hudlarian was tough and might not have felt the beating; the infant had stopped crying so he must have got through to it

somehow. Admittedly Hudlarians were hard and tough, but this was a baby and babies had weak spots. Human babies, for instance, had a very soft spot on the top of their heads...

When O'Mara's utterly exhausted body plunged into sleep his last coherent thought was that he was the dirtiest, lowest louse that had ever been born.

Sixteen hours later he awoke. It was a slow, natural process which brought him barely above the level of unconsciousness. He had a brief feeling of wonder at the fact that the infant was not responsible for waking him before he drifted back to sleep again. The next time he awakened was five hours later and to the sound of Waring coming through the airlock.

"Dr. P-Pelling asked me to bring this," he said, tossing O'Mara a small book. "And I'm not doing you a favour, understand – it's just that he said it was for the good of the youngster. How is it doing?"

"Sleeping," said O'Mara.

Waring moistened his lips. "I'm-I'm supposed to check. C-C-Caxton says so."

"Ca-Ca-Caxton would," mimicked O'Mara.

He watched the other silently as Waring's face grew a deeper red. Waring was a thin young man, sensitive, not very strong, and the stuff of which heroes were made. On his arrival O'Mara had been overwhelmed with stories about this tractor-beam operator. There had been an accident during the fitting of a power pile and

Waring had been trapped in a section which was inadequately shielded. But he had kept his head and, following instructions radioed to him from an engineer outside, had managed to avert a slow atomic explosion which nevertheless would have taken the lives of everyone in his section. He had done this while all the time fully convinced that the level of radiation in which he worked would, in a few hours time, certainly cause his death.

But the shielding had been more effective than had been thought and Waring did not die. The accident had left its mark on him, however, they told O'Mara. He had black outs, he stuttered, his nervous system had been subtly affected, they said, and there were other things which O'Mara himself would see and was urged to ignore. Because Waring had saved all their lives and for that he deserved special treatment.

That was why they made way for him wherever he went, let him win all fights, arguments and games of skill or chance, and generally kept him wrapped in a swathe of sentimental cotton-wool.

And that was why Waring was a spoiled insufferable, simpering brat.

Watching his white-lipped face and clenched fists, O'Mara smiled. He had never let Waring win at anything if he could possibly help it, and the first time the tractor-beam man had started a fight with him had also been the last. Not that he had hurt him, he had been just tough enough to demonstrate that fighting O'Mara was not a good idea.

"Go in and have a look," O'Mara said eventually. "Do what Ca-Ca-Caxton says."

They went in, observed the gently twitching infant briefly and came out. Stammering, Waring said that he had to go and headed for the airlock. He didn't often stutter these days, O'Mara knew; probably he was scared the subject of the accident would be brought up.

"Just a minute," said O'Mara. "I'm running out of food compound, will you bring – "

"G-get it yourself!"

O'Mara stared at him until Waring looked away, then he said quietly, "Caxton can't have it both ways. If this infant has to be cared for so thoroughly that I'm not allowed to either feed or keep it in airless conditions, it would be negligence on my part to go away and leave it for a couple of

hours to get food. Surely you see that. The Lord alone knows what harm the kid might come to if it was left alone. I've been made responsible for this infant's welfare so I insist..."

"B-b-but it won't – "

"It only means an hour or so of your rest period every second or third day," said O'Mara sharply. "Cut the bellyaching. And stop sputtering at me, you're old enough to talk properly."

Waring's teeth came together with a click. He took a deep, shuddering breath then with his jaws still clenched furiously together he exhaled. The sound was like an airlock valve being cracked. He said: "It... will... take... all of... my next two rest periods. The FROB quarters... where the food is kept... are being fitted to the main

assembly the day after tomorrow. The food compound will have to be transferred before then."

"See how easy it is when you try," said O'Mara, grinning. "You were a bit jerky at first there, but I understood every word. You're doing fine. And by the way, when you're stacking the food tanks outside the airlock will you try not to make too much noise in case you wake the baby?"

For the next two minutes Waring called O'Mara dirty names without repeating himself or stuttering once.

"I said you were doing fine," said O'Mara reprovingly. "You don't have to show off."

Chapter Three

After Waring left, O'Mara thought about the dismantling of the Hudlarian's quarters. With gravity grids set to four-Gs and what few other amenities they required the FROBs had been living in one of the key sections. If it was about to be fitted to the main assembly then the completion of the hospital structure itself could only be five or six weeks off. The final stages, he knew, would be exciting. Tractor men at their safe positions – depressions actually on the joining faces – tossing thousand-ton loads about the sky, bringing them together gently while fitters checked alignment or

adjusted or prepared the slowly closing faces for joining. Many of them would disregard the warning lights until the last possible moment, and take the most hair-raising risks imaginable, just to save the time and trouble of having their sections pulled apart and rejoined again for a possible re-fitting.

O'Mara would have liked to be in on the finish, instead of baby-sitting!

Thought of the infant brought back the worry he had been concealing from Waring. It had never slept this long before – it must be twenty hours since it had gone to sleep, or he had kicked it to sleep. FROBs were tough, of course, but wasn't it possible that the infant was not simply asleep but unconscious through concussion...?

O'Mara reached for the book which Pelling had sent and began to read.

It was slow, heavy going but at the end of two hours O'Mara knew a little about the handling of Hudlarian babies, and the knowledge brought both relief and despair.

Apparently his fit of temper and subsequent kicking had been a good thing – FROB babies needed constant petting and a quick calculation of the amount of force used by an adult of the species administering a gentle pat to its offspring showed that O'Mara's furious attack had been a very weak pat indeed. But the book warned against the dangers of over-feeding, and O'Mara was definitely guilty on this count. Seemingly the proper thing to do was to feed it every five or six hours during its waking period and use physical methods of soothing – patting, that was – if

it appeared restless or still hungry. Also it appeared that FROB infants required, at fairly frequent intervals, a bath.

On the home planet this involved something like a major sand-blasting operation, but O'Mara thought that this was probably due to the pressure and stickiness of the atmosphere. Another problem which he would have to solve was how to administer a hard enough consoling pat. He doubted very much if he could fly into a temper every time the baby needed its equivalent of a nursing.

But at least he would have plenty of time to work out something, because one of the things he had found out about them was that they were wakeful for two full days at a stretch, and slept for five.

During the first five-day period of sleep O'Mara was able to devise methods of petting and bathing his charge, and even had a couple of days free to relax and gather his strength for the two days of hard labour ahead when the infant woke up. It would have been a killing routine for a man of ordinary strength, but O'Mara discovered that after the first two weeks of it he seemed to make the necessary physical and, mental adjustment to it. And at the end of four weeks the pain and stiffness had gone out of his leg and he had no worries regarding the baby at all.

Outside, the project neared completion. The vast, three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle was finished except for a few unimportant pieces around the edges. A Monitor Corps investigator had arrived and was asking questions — of everybody, apparently, except O'Mara.

He couldn't help wondering if Waring had been questioned yet, and if he had what the tractor man had said. The investigator was a psychologist, unlike the mere Engineer officers already on the project, and very likely no fool. O'Mara thought that he, himself, was no fool either; he had worked things out and by rights he should feel, no anxiety over the outcome of the Monitor's investigations. O'Mara had sized up the situation here and the people in it, and the reactions of everyone were predictable. But it all depended on what Waring told that Monitor.

You're turning yellow! O'Mara thought in angry self-disgust. Now that your pet theories are being put to the test you're scared silly they won't work. You want to crawl to Waring and lick his boots!

And that course, O'Mara knew, would be introducing a wild variable into what should be a predictable situation, and it would almost certainly wreck everything. Yet the temptation was strong nevertheless.

It was at the beginning of the sixth week of his enforced guardianship of the infant, while he was reading up on some of the weird and wonderful diseases to which baby FROBs were prone, his airlock tell-tale indicated a visitor. He got off the couch quickly and faced the opening seal, trying hard to look as if he hadn't a worry in the world.

But it was only Caxton.

"I was expecting the Monitor," said O'Mara.

Caxton grunted. "Hasn't seen you yet, eh? Maybe he figures it would be a waste of time. After what we've told him he probably thinks the case is open and shut. He'll have cuffs with him when he comes."

O'Mara just looked at him. He was tempted to ask Caxton if the Corpsman had questioned Waring yet, but it was only a small temptation.

"My reason for coming," said Caxton harshly, "is to find out about the water. Stores department tells me you've been requisitioning treble the amount of water that you could conceivably use. You starting an aquarium or something?"

Deliberately O'Mara avoided giving a direct answer. He said, "It's time for the baby's bath, would you like – to watch?"

He bent down, deftly removed a section of floor plating and reached inside.

"What are you doing?" Caxton burst out. "Those are the gravity grids, you're not allowed to touch – "

Suddenly the floor took on a thirty degree list. Caxton staggered against a wall, swearing. O'Mara straightened up, opened the inner seal of the airlock, then started up what was now a stiff gradient towards the bedroom. Still insisting loudly that O'Mara was neither allowed nor qualified to alter the artificial gravity settings, Caxton followed.

Inside, O'Mara said, "This is the spare food sprayer with the nozzle modified to project a high pressure jet of water." He pointed

the instrument and began to demonstrate, playing the jet against a small area of the infant's hide. The subject of the demonstration was engaged in pushing what was left of one of O'Mara's chairs into even more unrecognisable shapes, and ignored them.

"You can see," O'Mara went on, "the area of skin where the food compound has hardened. This has to be washed at intervals because it clogs the being's absorption mechanism in those areas, causing the food intake to drop. This makes a young Hudlarian very unhappy and, ah, noisy..." O'Mara trailed off into silence. He saw that Caxton wasn't looking at the infant but was watching the water which rebounded from its hide streaming along the now steeply slanted bedroom door, across the living room and into the open airlock. Which was just as well,

because O'Mara's sprayer had uncovered a patch of the youngster's hide which had a texture and colour he had never seen before. Probably there was nothing to worry about, but it was better not to have Caxton see it and ask questions.

"What's that up there?" said Caxton, pointing towards the bedroom ceiling.

In order to give the infant the petting it deserved O'Mara had had to knock together a system of levers, pulleys and counterweights and suspend the whole ungainly mass from the ceiling. He was rather proud of the gadget; it enabled him to administer a good, solid pat – a blow which would have instantly killed a human being – anywhere on that half-ton carcass. But he doubted if Caxton would appreciate the gadget. Probably the section chief would swear that he was torturing the baby

and forbid its use.

O'Mara started out of the bedroom. Over his shoulder he said, "Just lifting tackle."

He dried up the wet patches of floor with a cloth which he threw into the now partly water-filled airlock. His sandals and coveralls were wet so he threw them in, also, then he closed the inner seal and opened the outer. While the water was boiling off into the vacuum outside he readjusted the gravity grids so that the floor was flat and the walls vertical again, then he retrieved his sandals, coveralls and cloth which were now bone dry.

"You seem to have everything well organised," said Caxton grudgingly as he fastened his helmet. "At least you're looking after the youngster better than you

did its parents. See it stays that way. The Monitor will be along to see you at hour nine tomorrow," he added, and left.

O'Mara returned quickly to the bedroom for a closer look at the coloured patch. It was a pale bluish grey and in that area the smooth, almost steel-hard surface of the skin had taken on a sort of crackle finish. O'Mara rubbed the patch gently and the FROB wriggled and gave a blast of sound that was vaguely interrogatory.

"You and me both," said O'Mara absently. He couldn't remember reading about anything like this, but then he had not read all the book yet. The sooner he did so the better.

The chief method of communicating between beings of different species was by means of a Translator, which electronically

sorted and classified all sense-bearing sounds and reproduced them in the native language of its user. Another method, used when large amounts of accurate data of a more subjective nature had to be passed on, was the Educator tape system. This transferred bodily all the sensory impressions, knowledge and personality of one being into the mind of another. Coming a long way third both in popularity and accuracy was the written language which was somewhat extravagantly called Universal.

Universal was of use only to beings who possessed brains linked to optical receptors capable of abstracting knowledge from patterns of markings on a flat surface – in short, the printed page. While there were many species with this ability, the response to colour in each species was very rarely matched. What

appeared to be a bluish-grey patch to O'Mara might look like anything from yellow-grey to dirty purple to another being, and the trouble was that the other being might have been the author of the book.

One of the appendices gave a rough colour-equivalent chart, but it was a tedious, time-consuming job checking back on it, and his knowledge of Universal was not perfect anyway.

Five hours later he was still no nearer diagnosing the FROBs ailment, and the single blue-grey patch on its hide had grown to twice its original size and been joined by three more. He fed the infant, wondering anxiously whether that was the right thing to do in a case like this, then returned quickly to his studies.

According to the handbook there were literally hundreds of mild, short-lived diseases to which young Hudlarrians were subject. This youngster had escaped them solely because it had been fed on tanked food compound and had avoided the airborne bacteria so prevalent on its home planet. Probably this disease was nothing worse than the Hudlarian equivalent of a dose of measles, O'Mara told himself reassuringly, but it *looked* serious. At the next feeding the number of patches had grown to seven and they were a deeper, angrier blue, also the baby was continually slapping at itself with its appendages. Obviously the coloured patches itched badly. Armed with this new datum O'Mara returned to the book.

And suddenly he found it. The symptoms were given as rough, discoloured patches on the tegument with severe itching due to

unabsorbed food particles. Treatment was to cleanse the irritated patches after each feed so as to kill the itching and let nature take care of the rest. The disease was a very rare one on Hudlar these days, the symptoms appeared with dramatic suddenness and it ran its course and disappeared equally quickly. Provided ordinary care was taken of the patient, the book stated, the disease was not dangerous.

O'Mara began converting the figures into his own time and size scale. As accurately as he could come to it the coloured patches should grow to about eighteen inches across and he could expect anything up to twelve of them before they began to fade. This would occur, calculating from the time he had noticed the first spot, in approximately six hours.

He hadn't a thing to worry about.

Chapter Four

At the conclusion of the next feeding O'Mara carefully sprayed the blue patches clean, but still the young FROB kept slapping furiously at itself and quivering ponderously. Like a kneeling elephant with six angrily waving trunks, he thought. O'Mara had another look at the book, but it still maintained that under ordinary conditions the disease was mild and short-lived, and that the only palliative treatment possible was rest and seeing that the affected areas were kept clean.

Kids, thought O'Mara distractedly, were a blasted worrisome thing...! All that quivering and slapping looked wrong, common-sense told him, and should be stopped. Maybe the infant was scratching through sheer force of habit, though the violence of the process made this seem doubtful, and a distraction of some kind would make it stop. Quickly O'Mara chose a fifty-pound weight and used his lifting tackle to swing it to the ceiling. He began raising and dropping it rhythmically over the spot which he had discovered gave the infant the most pleasure – an area two feet back of the hard, transparent membrane which protected its eyes. Fifty pounds dropping from a height of eight feet was a nice gentle pat to a Hudlarian.

Under the patting the FROB grew less violent in its movements. But as soon as O'Mara stopped it began lashing at itself

worse than ever, and even running full tilt into walls and what was left of the furniture. During one frenzied charge it nearly escaped into the living room, and the only thing which stopped it was the fact that it was too big to go through the door. Up to that moment O'Mara did not realise how much weight the FROB had put on in five weeks.

Finally sheer fatigue made him give up. He left the FROB threshing and blundering about in the bedroom and threw himself on to the couch outside to try to think.

According to the book it was now time for the blue patches to begin to fade. But they weren't fading — they had reached the maximum number of twelve and instead of being eighteen or less inches across they were nearly double that size. They were so large that at the next feeding the

absorption area of the infant would have shrunk by a half, which meant that it would be further weakened by not getting enough food. And everyone knew that itchy spots should not be scratched if the condition was not to spread and become more serious...

A raucous foghorn note interrupted his thoughts. O'Mara had experience enough to know by the sound that the infant was badly frightened, and by the relative decrease in volume that it was growing weak as well.

He needed help badly, but O'Mara doubted very much if there was anyone available who could furnish it. Telling Caxton about it would be useless – the section chief would only call in Pelling and Felling was much less informed on the subject of Hudlarian children than was O'Mara, who had been

specialising in the subject for the past five weeks. That course would only waste time and not help the kid at all, and there was a strong possibility that — despite the presence of a Monitor investigator — Caxton would see to it that something pretty violent happened to O'Mara for allowing the infant to take sick, for that was the way the section chief would look at it.

Caxton didn't like O'Mara. Nobody liked O'Mara.

If he had been well-liked on the project nobody would have thought of blaming him for the infant's sickness, or immediately and unanimously assuming that he was the one responsible for the death of its parents. But he had made the decision to appear a pretty lousy character, and he had been too damned successful.

Maybe he really was a despicable person and that was why the role had come so easy to him. Perhaps the constant frustration of never having the chance to really use the brain which was buried in his ugly, muscle-bound body had gradually soured him, and the part he thought he was playing was the real O'Mara.

If only he had stayed clear of the Waring business. That was what had them really mad at him.

But this sort of thinking was getting him nowhere. The solution of his own problems lay – in part, at least – in showing that he was responsible, patient, kind and possessed the various other attributes which his fellow men looked on with respect. To do that he must first show that he could be trusted with the care of a baby.

He wondered suddenly if the Monitor could help. Not personally; a Corps psychologist officer could hardly be expected to know about obscure diseases of Hudlar children, but through his organisation. As the Galaxy's police, maid-of-all-work and supreme authority generally, the Monitor Corps would be able to find at short notice a being who would know the necessary answers. But again, that being would almost certainly be found on Hudlar itself, and the authorities there already knew of the orphaned infant's position and help had probably been on the way for weeks. It would certainly arrive sooner than the Monitor could bring it. Help might arrive in time to save the infant. But again maybe it might not.

The problem was still O'Mara's.

About as serious as a dose of measles. But

measles, in a human baby, could be very serious if the patient was kept in a cold room or in some other environment which, although not deadly in itself, could become lethal to an organism whose resistance was lowered by disease or lack of food. The handbook had prescribed rest, cleansing and nothing else. Or had it? There might be a large and well hidden assumption there. The kicker was that the patient under discussion was residing on its home world at the time of the illness. Under ordinary conditions like that the disease probably was mild and short-lived.

But O'Mara's bedroom was not, for a Hudlarian baby with the disease, anything like normal conditions.

With that thought came the answer, if only he wasn't too late to apply it. Abruptly O'Mara pushed himself out of the couch

and hurried to the spacesuit locker. He was climbing into the heavy duty model when the communicator beeped at him.

"O'Mara," Caxton's voice brayed at him when he had acknowledged, "the Monitor wants to talk to you. It wasn't supposed to be until tomorrow but – "

"Thank you, Mr. Caxton," broke in a quiet, firmer voice. There was a pause, then: "My name is Craythorne, Mr. O'Mara. I had planned to see you tomorrow as you know, but I managed to clear up some other work which left me time for a preliminary chat..."

What, thought O'Mara fulminatingly, a damned awkward time you had to pick! He finished putting on the suit but left the gauntlets and helmet off. He began tearing into the panel which covered the air-supply

controls.

"...To tell you the truth," the quiet voice of the Monitor went on, "your case is incidental to my main work here. My job is to arrange accommodation and so on for the various life-forms who will shortly be arriving to staff this hospital, and to do everything possible to avoid friction developing between them when they do come. There are a lot of finicky details to attend to, but at the moment I'm free. And I'm curious about you, O'Mara. I'd like to ask some questions."

This is one smooth operator! thought one half of O'Mara's mind. The other half noted that the air-supply controls were set to suit the conditions he had in mind. He left the panel hanging loose and began pulling up a floor section to get at, the artificial gravity grid underneath. A little absently he said,

"You'll have to excuse me if I work while we talk. Caxton will explain – "

"I've told him about the kid," Caxton broke in, "and if you think you're fooling him by pretending to be the harassed mother type...!"

"I understand," said the Monitor. "I'd also like to say that forcing you to live with an FROB infant when such a course was unnecessary comes under the heading of cruel and unusual punishment, and that about ten years should be knocked off your sentence for what you've taken this past five weeks – that is, of course, if you're found guilty. And now, I always think it's better to see who one is talking to. Can we have vision, please?"

The suddenness with which the artificial gravity grids switched from one to two-Gs

caught O'Mara by surprise. His arms folded under him and his chest thumped the floor. A frightened bawl from his patient in the next room must have disguised the noise he made from his listeners because they didn't mention it. He did the great grand-daddy of all press-ups and heaved himself to his knees.

He fought to keep from gasping. "Sorry, my vision transmitter is on the blink."

The Monitor was silent just long enough to let O'Mara know that he knew he was lying, and that he would disregard the lie for the moment. He said finally, "Well, at least you can see me," and O'Mara's vision plate lit up.

It showed a youngish man with close-cropped hair whose eyes seemed twenty

years older than the rest of his features. The shoulder tabs of a Major were visible on the trim, dark-green tunic and the collar bone bore a caduceus. O'Mara thought that in different circumstances he would have liked this man.

"I've something to do in the next room," O'Mara lied again. "Be with you in a minute."

He began the job of setting the anti-gravity belt on his suit to two-Gs repulsion, which would exactly counteract the floor's present attraction and allow him to increase the pull to four-Gs without too much discomfort to himself. He would then re-set the belt for three-Gs, and that would give him back a normal gravity apparent of one-G.

At least that was what should have happened.

Instead the G-belt or the floor grids or both started producing half-G fluctuations, and the room went mad. It was like being in an express elevator which was constantly being started and stopped. The frequency of the surges built up rapidly until O'Mara was being shaken up and down so hard his teeth rattled. Before he could react to this a new and more devastating complication occurred. As well as variations in strength the floor grids were no longer acting at right angles to their surface, but yawed erratically from ten to thirty degrees from the vertical. No storm-tossed ship had ever pitched and rolled as viciously as this. O'Mara staggered, grabbed frantically for the couch, missed and was flung heavily against the wall. The next surge sent him skidding against the opposite wall before he was able to switch off the G-belt.

The room settled down to a steady gravity-pull of two-Gs again.

"Will this take long?" asked the Monitor suddenly.

O'Mara had almost forgotten the Major during the past hectic seconds. He did his best to make his voice sound both natural and as if it was coming from the next room as he replied, "It might. Could you call back later?"

"I'll wait," said the Monitor.

For the next few minutes O'Mara tried to forget the bruising he had received despite the protection given him by the heavy spacesuit, and concentrate on thinking his way out of this latest mess. He was beginning to *see* what must have

happened.

When two anti-gravity generators of the same power and frequency were used closed together, a pattern of interference was set up which affected the stability of both. The grids in O'Mara's quarters were merely a temporary job and powered by a generator similar to the one used in his suit, though normally a difference in frequency was built in against the chance of such instability occurring. But O'Mara had been fiddling with the grid settings constantly for the past five weeks – every time the infant had a bath, to be extra – so that he must have unknowingly altered the frequency.

He didn't know what he had done wrong and there wasn't enough time to try fixing it if he had known. Gingerly, O'Mara switched on his G-belt again and slowly

began increasing power. It registered over three-quarters of a G before the first signs of instability appeared.

Four-Gs less three-quarters made a little over three-Gs. It looked, O'Mara thought grimly, like he was going to have to do this the hard way...

Chapter Five

O'Mara closed his helmet quickly, then strung a cable from his suit mike to the communicator so that he would be able to talk without Caxton or the Monitor realising that he was sealed inside his suit. If he was to have time to complete the treatment they must not suspect that there was anything out of the ordinary going on here. Next came the final adjustments to the air-pressure regulator and gravity grids.

Inside two minutes the atmosphere pressure in the two rooms had multiplied

six times and the gravity apparent was four-Gs – the nearest, in fact, that O'Mara could get to 'ordinary conditions' for a Hudlarian. With shoulder muscles straining and cracking with the effort – for his under-powered G-belt took only three-quarters of a gravity off the four-G pull in the room – he withdrew the incredibly awkward and ponderous thing which his arm had become from the grid servicing space and rolled heavily onto his back.

He felt as if his baby was sitting on his chest, and large, black blotches hung throbbing before his eyes. Through them he could see a section of ceiling and, at a crazy angle, the vision panel. The face in it was becoming impatient.

"I'm back, Major," gasped O'Mara. He fought to control his breathing so that the words would not be squeezed out too fast.

"I suppose you want to hear my side of the accident?"

"No," said the Monitor. "I've heard the tape Caxton made. What I'm curious about is your background prior to coming here. I've checked up and there is something which doesn't quite fit..."

A thunderous eruption of noise blasted into the conversation. Despite the deeper note caused by the increased air pressure O'Mara recognised the signal for what it was; the FROB was angry and hungry.

With a mighty effort O'Mara rolled onto his side, then propped himself up on his elbows. He stayed that way for a while gathering strength to roll over onto his hands and knees. But when he finally accomplished this he found that his arms and legs were swelling and felt as if they

would burst from the pressure of blood piling up in them. Gasping, he eased himself down flat onto his chest. Immediately the blood rushed to the front of his body and his vision began to red out.

He couldn't crawl on hands and knees nor wriggle on his stomach. Most certainly, under three-Gs, he could not stand up and walk. What else was there?

O'Mara struggled onto his side again and rolled back, but this time with his elbows propping him up. The neck-rest of his suit supported his head, but the insides of the sleeves were very lightly padded and his elbows hurt. And the strain of holding up even part of his three times heavier than normal body made his heart pound. Worst of all, he was beginning to black out again.

Surely there must be some way to equalise, or at least distribute, the pressures in his body so that he could stay conscious and move. O'Mara tried to visualise the layout of the acceleration chairs which had been used in ships before artificial gravity came along. It had been a not-quite-prone position, he remembered suddenly, with the knees drawn up...

Inching along on his elbows, bottom and feet, O'Mara progressed snail-like towards the bedroom. His embarrassment of riches where muscles were concerned was certainly of use now – in these conditions any ordinary man would have been plastered helplessly against the floor. Even so it took him fifteen minutes to reach the food sprayer in the bedroom, and during practically every second of the way the baby kept up its ear-splitting racket. With the increased pressure the noise was so

tremendously loud and deep that every bone in O'Mara's body seemed to vibrate to it.

"I'm trying to talk to you!" the Monitor yelled during a lull. "Can't you keep that blasted kid shut up!"

"It's hungry," said O'Mara. "It'll quiet down when it's fed..."

The food sprayer was mounted on a trolley and O'Mara had fitted a pedal control so as to leave both hands free for aiming. Now that his patient was immobilised by four gravities he didn't have to use his hands. Instead he was able to nudge the trolley into position with his shoulders and depress the pedal with his elbow. The high-pressure jet tended to bend floorwards owing to the extra gravity but he did finally manage to cover the infant with food. But

cleaning the affected areas of food compound was another matter. The water jet, which handled very awkwardly from floor level, had no accuracy at all. The best he could manage was to wash down the wide, vivid blue patch – formed from three separate patches which had grown together – which covered nearly one quarter of its total skin area.

After that O'Mara straightened out his legs and lowered his back gently to the floor. Despite the three-Gs acting on him, the strain of maintaining that half-sitting position for the last half hour made him feel almost comfortable.

The baby had stopped crying.

"What I was about to say," said the Monitor heavily when the silence looked

like lasting for a few minutes, "was that your record on previous jobs does not fit what I find here. Previously you were, as you are now, a restless, discontented type, but you were invariably popular with your colleagues and only a little less so with your superiors – this last being because your superiors were sometimes wrong and you never were..."

"I was every bit as smart as they were," said O'Mara tiredly, "and proved it often. But I didn't *look* intelligent, I had mucker written all over me!"

It was strange, O'Mara thought, but he felt almost disinterested in his own personal trouble now. He couldn't take his eyes off the angry blue patch on the infant's side. The colour had deepened and also the centre of the patch seemed to have swelled. It was as if the super-hard

tegument had softened and the FROB's enormous internal pressure had produced a swelling. Increasing the gravity and pressure to the Hudlarian normal should, he hoped, halt that particular development — if it wasn't a symptom of something else entirely.

O'Mara had thought of carrying his idea a step further and spraying the air around the patient with food compound. On Hudlar the natives' food was comprised of tiny organisms floating in their super-thick atmosphere, but then again the handbook expressly stated that food particles must be kept away from the affected areas of tegument, so that the extra gravity and pressure should be enough...

"...Nevertheless," the Monitor was saying, "if a similar accident had happened on one of your previous jobs, your story

would have been believed. Even if it had been your fault they would have rallied round to defend you from outsiders like myself."

"What caused you to change from a friendly, likeable type of personality to *this....?*"

"I was bored," said O'Mara shortly. There had been no sound from the infant yet, but he had seen the characteristic movements of the FROB's appendages which foretold of an outburst shortly to come. And it came. For the next ten minutes speech was, of course, impossible.

O'Mara heaved himself onto his side and rolled back onto his now raw and bleeding elbows. He knew what was wrong; the infant had missed its usual after-feed

nursing. O'Mara humped his way slowly across to the two counterweight ropes of the gadget he had devised for petting the infant and prepared to remedy this omission. But the ends of the ropes hung four feet above the floor.

Lying propped by one elbow and straining to raise the dead weight of his other arm, O'Mara thought that the rope could just as easily have been four miles away. Sweat poured off his face and body with the intensity of the effort and slowly, trembling and wobbling so much that his gauntleted hand went past it first time, he reached up and grabbed hold. Still gripping it tightly he lowered himself gently back bringing the rope with him.

The gadget operated on a system of counterweights, so that there was no extra pull needed on the controlling ropes. A

heavy weight dropped neatly onto the infant's back, administering a reassuring pat. O'Mara rested for a few minutes, then struggled up to repeat the process with the other rope, the pull on which would also wind up the first weight ready for use again.

After about the eighth pat he found that he couldn't see the end of the rope he was reaching for, though he managed to find it all the same. His head was being kept too high above the level of the rest of his body for too long a time and he was constantly on the point of blacking out. The diminished flow of blood to his brain was having other effects, too...

"...There, there," O'Mara heard himself saying in a definitely maudlin voice. "You're all right now, pappy will take care of you. There now, shush..."

The funny thing about it was that he really did feel a responsibility and a sort of angry concern for the infant. He had saved it once only to let *this* happen! Maybe the three-Gs which jammed him against the floor, making every breath a day's work and the smallest movement an operation which called for all the reserves of strength he possessed, was bringing back the memory of another kind of pressure – the slow, inexorable movement together of two large, inanimate and uncaring masses of metal.

The accident.

As fitter-in-charge of that particular shift O'Mara had just switched on the warning lights when he had seen the two adult Hudlarians chasing after their offspring on one of the faces being joined. He had

called them through his translator, urging them to get to safety and leave him to chase the youngster clear – being much smaller than its parents the slowly closing faces would take longer to reach it, and during those extra few minutes O'Mara would have been able to herd it out of danger. But either their translators were switched off or they were reluctant to trust the safety of their child to a diminutive human being. Whatever the reason, they remained between the faces until it was too late. O'Mara had to watch helplessly as they were trapped and crushed by the joining structures.

The sight of the young one, still unharmed because of its smaller girth, floundering about between the bodies of its late parents sent O'Mara into belated action. He was able to chase it out of danger before the sections came close enough to

trap it, and had just barely made it himself. For a few heart-stopping seconds back there O'Mara had thought he would have to leave a leg behind.

This was no place for kids anyway, he told himself angrily as he looked at the quivering, twitching body with the patches of vivid, scabrous blue. People shouldn't be allowed to bring kids out here, even tough people like the Hudlarians.

But Major Craythorne was speaking again.

"...Judging by what I hear going on over there," said the Monitor acidly, "you're taking very good care of your charge. Keeping the youngster happy and healthy will definitely be a point in your favour..."

Happy and healthy, thought O'Mara as he

reached towards the rope yet again.
Healthy...!

"...But there are other considerations," the quiet voice went on. "Were you guilty of negligence in not switching on the warning lights until after the accident occurred, which is what you are alleged to have done? And your previous record notwithstanding, here you have been a surly, quarrelsome bully and your behaviour towards Waring especially...!"

The Monitor broke off, looked faintly disapproving, then went on, "A few minutes ago you said that you did all these things because you were bored. Explain that."

"Wait a minute, Major," Caxton broke in, his face appearing suddenly behind Craythorne's on the screen. "He's stalling

for some reason, I'm sure of it. All those interruptions, this gasping voice he's using and this shush-a-bye-baby stuff is just an act to show what a great little nursemaid he is. I think I'll go over and bring him back here to answer you face to face-"

"That won't be necessary," said O'Mara quickly. "I'll answer any questions you want, right now."

He had a horrible picture of Caxton's reaction if the other saw the infant in its present state; the sight of it made O'Mara feel queasy and he was used to it now. Caxton wouldn't stop to think, or wait for explanations, or ask himself if it was fair to place an E-T in charge of a human who was completely ignorant of its physiology or weaknesses. He would just react. Violently.

And as for the Monitor...

O'Mara thought that he might get out of the accident part, but if the kid died as well he hadn't a hope. The infant had had a mild though uncommon disease which should have responded to treatment days ago, and instead had become progressively worse, so it would die anyway if O'Mara's last desperate try at reproducing its home planet's conditions did not come off. What he needed now was time. According to the book, about four to six hours of it.

Suddenly the futility of it all hit him. The infant's condition had not improved — it heaved and twitched and generally looked to be the most desperately ill and pitiable creature that had ever been born. O'Mara swore helplessly. What he was trying to do now should have been tried days ago, his baby was as good as dead, and continuing

this treatment for another five or six hours would probably kill or cripple him for life. And it would serve him right!

Chapter Six

The infant's appendages curled in the way O'Mara knew meant that it was going to cry again, and grimly he began pushing himself onto his elbows for another patting session. That was the very least he could do. And even though he was convinced that going on was useless, the kid had to be given the chance. O'Mara had to have time to finish the treatment without interruptions, and to insure that he would have to answer this Monitor's questions in a full and satisfactory manner. If the kid started crying again he wouldn't be able to do that.

"...For your kind co-operation," the Major was saying drily. "First off, I want an explanation for your sudden change of personality."

"I was bored," said O'Mara. "Hadn't enough to do. May be I'd become a bit of a sore head, too. But the main reason for setting out to be a lousy character was that there was a job I could do here which could not be done by a nice guy. I've studied a lot and think of myself as a pretty good rule-of-thumb psychologist..."

Suddenly came disaster. O'Mara's supporting elbow slipped as he was reaching for the counterweight rope and he crashed back to the floor from a distance of two-and-a-half feet. At three-Gs this was equivalent to a fall of seven feet. Luckily he was in a heavy duty suit with a padded

helmet so he did not lose consciousness. But he did cry out, and instinctively held onto the rope as he fell.

That was his mistake.

One weight dropped, the other swung up too far. It hit the ceiling with a crash and loosened the bracket which supported the light metal girder which carried it. The whole structure began to sag, and slip, then was suddenly yanked floorwards by four-G's onto the infant below. In his dazed state O'Mara could not guess at the amount of force expended on the infant — whether it was a harder than usual pat, the equivalent of a sharp smack on the bottom, or something very much more serious. The baby was very quiet afterwards, which worried him.

"...For the third time," shouted the Monitor, "what the blazes is going on in there?"

O'Mara muttered something which was unintelligible even to himself. Then Caxton joined in.

"There's something fishy going on, and I bet it involves the kid! I'm going over to see —"

"No wait!" said O'Mara desperately. "Give me six hours..."

"I'll see you," said Caxton, "in ten minutes."

"Caxton!" O'Mara shouted, "if you come through my airlock you'll kill me! I'll have the inner seal jammed open and if you

open the outer one you'll evacuate the place. Then the Major will lose his prisoner."

There was a sudden silence, then: "What," asked the Monitor quietly, "do you want the six hours for?"

O'Mara tried to shake his head to clear it, but now that it weighed three times heavier than normal he only hurt his neck. What *did* he want six hours for? Looking around him he began to wonder, because both the food sprayer and its connecting water tank had been wrecked by the fall of tackle from the ceiling. He could neither feed, wash, nor scarcely see his patient for fallen wreckage, so all he could do for six hours was watch and wait for a miracle. "I'm going over," said Caxton doggedly.

"You're not," said the Major, still polite

but with a no-nonsense tone. "I want to get to the bottom of this. You'll wait outside until I've spoken with O'Mara alone. Now O'Mara, *what... is... happening?*" Flat on his back again O'Mara fought to gain enough breath to carry on an extended conversation. He had decided that the best thing to do would be to tell the Monitor the exact truth, and then appeal to him to back O'Mara up in the only way possible which might save the infant – by leaving him alone for six hours. But O'Mara was feeling very low as he talked, and his vision was so poor that he couldn't tell sometimes whether his eyelids were open or shut. He did see someone hand the Major a note, but Craythorne didn't read it until O'Mara had finished speaking.

"You are in a mess," Craythorne said finally. He briefly looked sympathetic, then his tone hardened again. "And ordinarily I

should be forced to do as you suggest and give you that six hours. After all, you have the book and so you know more than we do. But the situation has changed in the last few minutes. I've just had word that two Hudlarians have arrived, one of them a doctor. You had better step down, O'Mara. You tried, but now let some skilled help salvage what they can from the situation. For the kid's sake," he added.

It was three hours later. Caxton, Waring and O'Mara were facing the Major across the Monitor's desk. Craythorne had just come in.

He said briskly, "I'm going to be busy for the next few days so we'll get this business settled quickly. First, the accident. O'Mara, your case depends entirely on Waring's corroboration for your story. Now there seems to be some pretty devious thinking

here on your part. I've already heard Waring's evidence, but to satisfy my own curiosity I'd like to know what *you* think he said?"

"He backed up my story," said O'Mara wearily. "He had no choice."

He looked down at his hands, still thinking about the desperately sick infant he had left in his quarters. He told himself again that he wasn't responsible for what had happened, but deep inside he felt that if he had shown more flexibility of mind and had started the pressure treatment sooner the kid would have been all right now. But the result of the accident enquiry didn't seem to matter now, one way or the other, and neither did the Waring business.

"Why do you think he had no choice?" prodded the Monitor sharply. Caxton had

his mouth open, looking confused. Waring would not meet O'Mara's eyes and he was beginning to blush.

"When I came here," O'Mara said dully, "I was looking out for a secondary job to fill my spare time, and hounding Waring was it. He is the reason for my being an obnoxious type, that was the only way I could go to work on him. But to understand that you have to go a bit farther back. Because of that power pile accident," O'Mara went on, "all the men of his section were very much in Waring's debt – you've probably heard the details by now. Waring himself was a mess. Physically he was below par – had to get shots to keep his blood-count up, was just about strong enough to work his control console, and was fairly wallowing in self-pity.

Psychologically he was a wreck. Despite all Pelling's assurances that the shots

would only be necessary for a few more months he was convinced that he had pernicious anaemia.

He also believed that he had been made sterile, again despite everything the doctor told him, and this conviction made him act and talk in a way which would give any normal man the creeps – because that sort of thing is pathological and there wasn't anything like that wrong with him. When I saw how things were I started to ridicule him every chance I got. I hounded him unmercifully. So the way I see it he had no other choice but to support my story. Simple gratitude demanded it."

"I begin to see the light," said the Major.
"Go on."

"The men around him were very much in his debt," O'Mara continued. "But instead of putting the brakes on, of giving him a

good talking to, they smothered him with sympathy. They let him win all fights, card-games or whatever, and generally treated him like a little tin god. I did none of these things. Whenever he lisped or stuttered or was awkward about anything," O'Mara went on, "whether it was due to one of his mental and self-inflicted disabilities or a physical one which he honestly couldn't help, I jumped on him hard with both feet. Maybe I was too hard sometimes, but remember that I was one man trying to undo the harm that was being done by fifty. Naturally he hated my guts, but he always knew exactly where he was with me. And I never pulled punches. On the very few occasions when he was able to get the better of me, he knew that he had won despite everything I could do to stop him — unlike his friends who let him beat them at everything and in so doing made his winning meaningless. That was exactly what he needed for what ailed him,

somebody to treat him as an equal and make no allowances at all. So when this trouble came," O'Mara ended, "I was pretty sure he would begin to see what I'd been doing for him – consciously as well as sub-consciously – and that simple gratitude plus the fact that basically he is a decent type would keep him from withholding the evidence which would clear me. Was I right?"

"You were," said the Major. He paused to quell Caxton who had jumped to his feet, protesting, then continued, "Which brings us to the FROB infant. Apparently your baby caught one of the mild but rare diseases which can only be treated successfully on the home planet," Craythorne went on. He smiled suddenly. "At least, that was what they thought until a few hours ago. Now our Hudlarian friends state that the proper treatment has already

been initiated by you and that all they have to do is wait for a couple of days and the infant will be as good as new. But they're very annoyed with you, O'Mara," the Monitor continued. "They say that you've rigged special equipment for petting and soothing the kid and that you've done this much more often than is desirable. The baby has been overfed and spoiled shamelessly, they say, so much so that at the moment it prefers human beings to members of its own species – "

Suddenly Caxton banged the desk. "You're not going to let him get away with this," he shouted, red-faced. "Waring doesn't know what he's saying sometimes..."

"Mr. Caxton," said the Monitor sharply, "all the evidence available proves that Mr. O'Mara is blameless, both at the time of the accident and while he was looking after the

infant later. However, I am not quite finished with him here, so perhaps you two would be good enough to leave..."

Caxton stormed out, followed more slowly by Waring. At the door the tractor-beam man paused, addressed one printable and three unprintable words to O'Mara, grinned suddenly and left. The Major sighed.

"O'Mara," he said sternly, "you're out of a job again, and while I don't as a rule give unasked for advice I would like to remind you of a few facts. In a few weeks time the staff and maintenance engineers for this hospital will be arriving and they will be comprised of practically every known species in the galaxy. My job is to settle them in and keep friction from developing between them so that eventually they will work together as a team. No text-book rules have been written to cover this sort of

thing yet, but before they sent me here my superiors said that it would require a good rule-of-thumb psychologist with plenty of common sense who was not afraid to take calculated risks. I think it goes without saying that two such psychologists would be even better..."

O'Mara was listening to him all right, but he was thinking of that grin he'd got from Waring. Both the infant and Waring were going to be all right now, he knew, and in his present happy state of mind he could refuse nothing to anybody. But apparently the Major had mistaken his abstraction for something else.

"...Dammit I'm offering you a job! You *fit* here, can't you see that? This is a hospital, man, and you've cured our first patient...!"

Part Two

Sector General

LIKE A SPRAWLING, misshapen Christmas tree the lights of Sector Twelve General Hospital blazed against the misty backdrop of the stars. From its view-ports shone lights that were yellow and red-orange and soft, liquid green, and others which were a searing actinic blue. There was darkness in places also. Behind these areas of opaque metal plating lay sections wherein the lighting was so viciously incandescent that the eyes of approaching ship's pilots had to be protected from it, or compartments which were so dark and cold that not even the light which filtered in from the stars could be allowed to penetrate to their inhabitants.

To the occupants of the Telfi ship which slid out of hyper-space to hang some

twenty miles from this mighty structure, the garish display of visual radiation was too dim to be detected without the use of instruments. The Telfi were energy-eaters. Their ship's hull shone with a crawling blue glow of radioactivity and its interior was awash with a high level of hard radiation which was also in all respects normal. Only in the stern section of the tiny ship were the conditions not normal. Here the active core of a power pile lay scattered in small, sub-critical and unshielded masses throughout the ship's Planetary Engines room, and here it was too hot even for the Telfi.

The group-mind entity that was the Telfi spaceship Captain – and Crew – energised its short-range communicator and spoke in the staccato clicking and buzzing language used to converse with those benighted beings who were unable to merge into a Telfi gestalt.

"This is a Telfi hundred-unit gestalt," it said slowly and distinctly. "We have casualties and require assistance. Our Classification to one group is VTXM, repeat VTXM..."

"Details, please, and degree of urgency," said a voice briskly as the Telfi was about to repeat the message. It was translated into the same language used by the Captain. The Telfi gave details quickly, then waited. Around it and through it lay the hundred specialised units that were both its mind and multiple body. Some of the units were blind, deaf and perhaps even dead cells that received or recorded no sensory impressions whatever, but there were others who radiated waves of such sheer, excruciating agony that the group-mind writhed and twisted silently in sympathy. Would that voice never reply,

they wondered, and if it did, would it be able to help them...?

"You must not approach the Hospital nearer than a distance of five miles," said the voice suddenly. "Otherwise there will be danger to unshielded traffic in the vicinity, or to beings within the establishment with low radiation tolerance."

"We understand," said the Telfi.

"Very well," said the voice. "You must also realise that your race is too hot for us to handle directly. Remote controlled mechanisms are already on the way to you, and it would ease the problem of evacuation if you arranged to have your casualties brought as closely as possible to the ship's largest entry port. If this cannot be done, do not worry — we have mechanisms capable of entering your

vessel and removing them."

The voice ended by saying that while they hoped to be able to help the patients, any sort of accurate prognosis was impossible at the present time.

The Telfi gestalt thought that soon the agony that tortured its mind and wide-flung multiple body would be gone, but so also would nearly one quarter of that body...

With that feeling of happiness possible only with eight hours sleep behind, a comfortable breakfast within and an interesting job in front of one, Conway stepped out briskly for his wards. They were not really his wards, of course — if anything went seriously wrong in one of them the most he would be expected to do would be to scream for help. But considering the fact that he had been here

only two months he did not mind that, or knowing that it would be a long time before he could be trusted to deal with cases requiring other than mechanical methods of treatment. Complete knowledge of any alien physiology could be obtained within minutes by Educator tape, but the skill to use that knowledge – especially in surgery came only with time. Conway was looking forward with conscious pride to spending his life acquiring that skill.

At an intersection Conway saw an FGFI he knew – a Tralthan intern who was humping his elephantine body along on six spongy feet. The stubby legs seemed even more rubbery than usual and the little OTSB who lived in symbiosis with it was practically comatose. Conway said brightly, "Good morning," and received a translated – and therefore necessarily emotionless – reply of "Drop dead." Conway grinned.

There had been considerable activity in and about Reception last evening. Conway had not been called, but it looked as though the Tralthan had missed both his recreation and rest periods.

A few yards beyond the Tralthan he met another who was walking slowly alongside a small DBDG like himself. Not entirely like himself, though — DBDG was the one-group classification which gave the grosser physical attributes, the number of arms, heads, legs, etc., and their placement. The fact that the being had seven-fingered hands, stood only four feet tall and looked like a very cuddly teddy-bear — Conway had forgotten the being's system of origin, but remembered being told that it came from a world which had suffered a sudden bout of glaciation which had caused its highest life-form to develop intelligence

and a thick red fur coat – would not have shown up unless the Classification were taken to two or three groups. The DBDG had his hands clasped behind his back and was staring with vacant intensity at the floor. His hulking companion showed similar concentration, but favoured the ceiling because of the different position of his visual organs. Both wore their professional insignia on golden armbands, which meant that they were lordly Diagnosticians, no less. Conway refrained from saying good morning to them as he passed, or from making undue noise with his feet.

Possibly they were deeply immersed in some medical problem, Conway thought, or equally likely, they had just had a tiff and were pointedly ignoring each other's existence. Diagnosticians were peculiar people. It wasn't that they were insane to

begin with, but their job forced a form of insanity onto them.

At each corridor intersection annunciators had been pouring out an alien gabble which he had only half heard in passing, but when it switched suddenly to Terran English and Conway heard his own name being called, surprise halted him dead in his tracks.

"...To Admittance Lock Twelve at once," the voice was repeating monotonously. "Classification VTXM-23. Dr. Conway, please go to Admittance Lock Twelve at once. A VTXM-23..."

Conway's first thought was that they could not possibly mean him. This looked as if he was being asked to deal with a case – a big one, too, because the '23' after the classification code referred to the number

of patients to be treated. And that Classification, VTXM, was completely new to him. Conway knew what the letters stood for, of course, but he had never thought that they could exist in that combination. The nearest he could make of them was some form of telepathic species – the V prefixing the classification showed this as their most important attribute, and that mere physical equipment was secondary – who existed by the direct conversion of radiant energy, and usually as a closely co-operative group or gestalt. While he was still wondering if he was ready to cope with a case like this, his feet had turned and were taking him towards Lock Twelve.

His patients were waiting for him at the lock, in a small metal box heaped around with lead bricks and already loaded onto a powered stretcher carrier. The orderly told

him briefly that the beings called themselves the Telfi, that preliminary diagnosis indicated the use of the Radiation Theatre, which was being readied for him, and that owing to the portability of his patients he could save time by calling with them to the Educator room and leaving them outside while he took his Telfi physiology tape.

Conway nodded thanks, hopped onto the carrier and set it moving, trying to give the impression that he did this sort of thing every day.

In Conway's pleasurable but busy life with the highly unusual establishment that was Sector General there was only one sour note, and he met it again when he entered the Educator room: there was a Monitor in charge. Conway disliked Monitors. The presence of one affected him rather like the

close proximity of a carrier of a contagious disease. And while Conway was proud of the fact that as a sane, civilised and ethical being he could never bring himself actually to hate anybody or anything, he disliked Monitors intensely. He knew, of course, that there were people who went off the beam sometimes, and that there had to be somebody who could take the action necessary to preserve the peace. But with his abhorrence of violence in any form, Conway could not like the men who took that action.

And what were Monitors doing in a hospital anyway?

The figure in neat, dark green coveralls seated before the Educator control console turned quickly at his entrance and Conway got another shock. As well as a Major's insignia on his shoulder, the Monitor wore

the Staff and Serpents emblem of a Doctor I "My name is O'Mara," said the Major in a pleasant voice. "I'm the Chief Psychologist of this madhouse. You, I take it, are Dr. Conway." He smiled.

Conway made himself smile in return, knowing that it looked forced, and that the other knew it also.

"You want the Telfi tape," O'Mara said, a trifle less warmly. "Well, Doctor, you've picked a real weirdie this time. Be sure you get it erased as soon as possible after the job is done — believe me, this isn't one you'll want to keep. Thumb-print this and sit over there."

While the Educator head-band and electrodes were being fitted, Conway tried to keep his face neutral, and keep from flinching away from the Major's hard,

capable hands. O'Mara's hair was a dull, metallic grey in colour, cut short, and his eyes also had the piercing qualities of metal. Those eyes had observed his reactions, Conway knew, and now an equally sharp mind was forming conclusions regarding them.

"Well, that's it," said O'Mara when finally it was all over. "But before you go, Doctor, I think you and I should have a little chat; a re-orientation talk, let's call it. Not now, though, you've got a case – but very soon."

Conway felt the eyes boring into his back as he left.

He should have been trying to make his mind a blank as he had been told to do, so the knowledge newly impressed there could bed down comfortably, but all Conway could think about was the fact that

a Monitor was a high member of the hospital's permanent staff – and a Doctor, to boot. How could the two professions mix? Conway thought of the arm-band he wore which bore the Tralthan Black and Red Circle, the Flaming Sun of the chlorine-breathing Illensa and the intertwining Serpents and Staff of Earth – all the honoured symbols of Medicine of the three chief races of the Galactic Union. And here was this Dr. O'Mara whose collar said he was a healer and whose shoulder tabs said he was something else entirely.

One thing was now sure: Conway would never feel really content here again until he discovered why the Chief Psychologist of the hospital was a Monitor.

Chapter Two

This was Conway's first experience of an alien physiology tape, and he noted with interest the mental double vision which had increasingly begun to affect his mind – a sure sign that the tape had 'taken.' By the time he had reached the Radiation Theatre he felt himself to be two people – an Earth-human called Conway and the great, five-hundred unit Telfi gestalt which had been formed to prepare a mental record of all that was known regarding the physiology of that race. That was the only disadvantage – if it was a disadvantage – of the Educator Tape system. Not only was knowledge

impressed on the mind undergoing 'tuition,' the personalities of the entities who had possessed that knowledge was transferred as well. Small wonder then that the Diagnosticians, who held in their mind sometimes as many as ten different tapes, were a little bit queer.

A diagnostician had the most important job in the hospital, Conway thought, as he donned radiation armour and readied his patients for the preliminary examination. He had sometimes thought in his more self-confident moments of becoming one himself. Their chief purpose was to perform original work in xenological medicine and surgery, using their tape-stuffed brains as a jumping-off ground, and to rally round, when a case arrived for which there was no physiology tape available, to diagnose and prescribe treatment.

Not for them were the simple, mundane injuries and diseases. For a Diagnostician to look at a patient that patient had to be unique, hopeless and at least three-quarters dead. When one did take charge of a case though, the patient was as good as cured — they achieved miracles with monotonous regularity.

With the lower orders of doctor there was always the temptation, Conway knew, to keep the contents of a tape rather than have it erased, in the hope of making some original discovery that would bring them fame. In practical, level-headed men like himself, however, it remained just that, a temptation.

Conway did not see his tiny patients even though he examined them individually. He couldn't unless he went to a lot of unnecessary trouble with shielding and

mirrors to do so. But he knew what. they were like, both inside and out, because the tape had practically made him one of them. That knowledge, taken together with the results of his examinations and the case history supplied him, told Conway everything he wanted to know to begin treatment.

His patients had been part of a Telfi gestalt engaged in operating an interstellar cruiser when there had been an accident in one of the power piles. The small, beetle-like and – individually – very stupid beings were radiation eaters, but that flare-up had been too much even for them. Their trouble could be classed as an extremely severe case of overeating coupled with prolonged over-stimulation of their sensory equipment, especially of the pain centres. If he simply kept them in a shielded container and starved them of radiation – a

course of treatment impossible on their highly radioactive ship – about seventy percent of them could be expected to cure themselves in a few hours. They would be the lucky ones, and Conway could even tell which of them came into that category. Those remaining would be a tragedy because if they did not suffer actual physical death their fate would be very much worse: they would lose the ability to join minds, and that in a Telfi was tantamount to being a hopeless cripple.

Only someone who shared the mind, personality and instincts of a Telfi, could appreciate the tragedy it was.

It was a great pity, especially as the case-history showed that it was these individuals who had forced themselves to adapt and remain operative during that sudden flare of radiation for the few seconds necessary

to scatter the pile and so save their ship from complete destruction. Now their metabolism had found a precarious balance based on three times the Telfi normal energy intake. If this intake of energy was interrupted for any lengthy period of time, say a few more hours, the communications centres of their brains would suffer. They would be left like so many dismembered hands and feet, with just enough intelligence to know that they had been cut off. On the other hand, if their upped energy-intake was continued they would literally burn themselves out within a week.

But there was a line of treatment indicated for these unfortunates, the only one, in fact. As Conway prepared his servos for the work ahead he felt that it was a highly unsatisfactory line – a matter of calculated risks, of cold, medical statistics which

nothing he could do would influence. He felt himself to be little more than a mechanic.

Working quickly, he ascertained that sixteen of his patients were suffering from the Telfi equivalent of acute indigestion. These he separated into shielded, absorbent bottles so that re-radiation from their still 'hot' bodies would not slow the 'starving' process. The bottles he placed in a small pile furnace set to radiate at Telfi normal, with a detector in each which would cause the shielding to fall away from them as soon as their excess radioactivity had gone. The remaining seven would require special treatment. He had placed them in another pile, and was setting the controls to simulate as closely as possible the conditions which had obtained during the accident in their ship, when the nearby communicator beeped at him. Conway

finished what he was doing, checked it, then said "Yes?"

"This is Enquiries, Dr. Conway. We've had a signal from the Telfi ship asking about their casualties. Have you any news for them yet?"

Conway knew that his news was not too bad, considering, but he wished intensely that it could be better. The breaking up or modification of a Telfi gestalt once formed could only be likened to a death trauma to the entities concerned, and with the empathy which came as a result of absorbing their physiology tape Conway felt for them. He said carefully, "Sixteen of them will be good as new in roughly four hours time. The other seven will be fifty percent fatalities, I'm afraid, but we won't know which for another few days. I have them baking in a pile at over double their

normal radiation requirements, and this will gradually be reduced to normal. Half of them should live through it. Do you understand?"

"Got you." After a few minutes the voice returned. It said, "The Telfi say that is very good, and thank you. Out."

He should have been pleased at dealing successfully with his first case, but Conway somehow felt let down. Now that it was over his mind felt strangely confused. He kept thinking that fifty percent of seven was three and a half, and what would they do with the odd half Telfi? He hoped that four would pull through instead of three, and that they would not be mental cripples. He thought that it must be nice to be a Telfi, to soak up radiation all the time, and the rich and varied impressions of a corporate body numbering perhaps hundreds of

individuals. It made his body feel somehow cold and alone. It was an effort to drag himself away from the warmth of the Radiation Theatre.

Outside he mounted the carrier and left it back at the admittance lock. The right thing to do now was to report to the Educator room and have the Telfi tape erased – he had been ordered to do that, in fact. But he did not want to go; the thought of O'Mara made him intensely uncomfortable, even a little afraid. Conway knew that all Monitors made him feel uncomfortable, but this was different. It was O'Mara's attitude, and that little chat he had mentioned. Conway had felt small, as if the Monitor was his superior in some fashion, and for the life of him Conway could not understand how he could feel small before a lousy Monitor!

The intensity of his feelings shocked him;

as a civilised, well-integrated being he should be incapable of thinking such thoughts. His emotions had verged upon actual hatred. Frightened of himself this time, Conway brought his mind under a semblance of control. He decided to side-step the question and not report to the Educator room until after he had done the rounds of his wards. It was a legitimate excuse if O'Mara should query the delay, and the Chief Psychologist might leave or be called away in the meantime. Conway hoped so.

His first call was on an AUGL from Chalderescol II, the sole occupant of the ward reserved for that species. Conway climbed into the appropriate protective garment – a simple diving suit in this instance – and went through the lock into the tank of green, tepid water which reproduced the being's living conditions.

He collected the instruments from the locker inside, then loudly signalled his presence. If the Chalder was really asleep down there and he startled it the results could be serious. One accidental flick of that tail and the ward would contain two patients instead of one.

The Chaldor was heavily plated and scaled, and slightly resembled a forty-foot long crocodile except that instead of legs there was an apparently haphazard arrangement of stubby fins – and a fringe of ribbon-like tentacles encircling its middle. It drifted limply near the bottom of the huge tank, the only sign of life being the periodic fogging of the water around its gills. Conway gave it a perfunctory examination – he was way behind time due to the Telfi job – and asked the usual question. The answer came through the water in some unimaginable form to

Conway's Translator attachment and into his phones as slow, toneless speech.

"I am grievously ill," said the Chalder, "I suffer."

You lie, thought Conway silently, *in all six rows of your teeth!* Dr. Lister, Sector General's Director and probably the foremost Diagnostician of the day, had practically taken this Chalder apart. His diagnosis had been hypochondria and the condition incurable. He had further stated that the signs of strain in certain sections of the patient's body plating, and its discomfort in those areas, were due simply to the big so-and-so's laziness and gluttony. Anybody knew that an exoskeletal life-form could not put on weight except from inside! Diagnosticians were not noted for their bedside manners.

The Chalder became really ill only when it was in danger of being sent home, so the Hospital had acquired a permanent patient. But it did not mind. Visiting as well as Staff medics and psychologists had given it a going over, and continued to do so; also all the interns and nurses of all the multitudinous races represented on the hospital's staff. Regularly and at short intervals it was probed, pried into and unmercifully pounded by trainees of varying degrees of gentleness, and it loved every minute of it. The hospital was happy with the arrangement and so was the Chalder. Nobody mentioned going home to it any more.

Chapter Three

Conway paused for a moment as he swam to the top of the great tank; he felt peculiar. His next call was supposed to be on two methane-breathing life-forms in the low temperature ward of his section, and he felt strongly loath to go. Despite the warmth of the water and the heat of his exertions while swimming around his massive patient he felt cold, and he would have given anything to have a bunch of students come flapping into the tank just for the company. Usually Conway did not like company, especially that of trainees, but now he felt cut-off, alone and friendless. The feelings

were so strong they frightened him. A talk with a Psychologist was definitely indicated, he thought, though not necessarily with O'Mara.

The construction of the hospital in this section resembled a heap of spaghetti – straight, bent and indescribably curved pieces of spaghetti. Each corridor containing an Earth-type atmosphere, for instance, was paralleled above, below and on each side – as well as being crossed above and below at frequent intervals – by others having different and mutually deadly variations of atmosphere, pressure and temperature. This was to facilitate the visiting of any given patient-species by any other species of doctor in the shortest possible time in case of emergency, because travelling the length of the hospital in a suit designed to protect a doctor against his patient's environment on

arrival was both uncomfortable and slow. It had been found more efficient to change into the necessary protective suit outside the wards being visited, as Conway had done.

Remembering the geography of this section Conway knew that there was a short-cut he could use to get to his frigid-blooded patients – along the water-filled corridor which led to the Chalder operating theatre, through the lock into the chlorine atmosphere of the Illensan PVSJ's and up two levels to the methane ward. This way would mean his staying in warm water for a little longer, and he was definitely feeling *cold*. A convalescent PVSJ rustled past him on spiny, membraneous appendages in the chlorine section and Conway found himself wanting desperately to talk to it, about anything. He had to force himself to go on.

The protective suit worn by DBDG's like himself while visiting the methane ward was in reality a small mobile tank. It was fitted with heaters inside to keep its occupant alive and refrigerators outside so that the leakage of heat would not immediately shrivel the patients to whom the slightest glow of radiant heat – or even light – was lethal. Conway had no idea how the scanner he used in the examinations worked – only those gadget-mad beings with the Engineering arm-bands knew that – except that it wasn't by infrared. That also was too hot for them.

As he worked Conway turned the heaters up until the sweat rolled off him and still he felt cold. He was suddenly afraid. Suppose he had caught something? When he was outside in air again he looked at the tiny tell-tale that was surgically embedded on

the inner surface of his fore-arm. His pulse, respiration and endocrine balance were normal except for the minor irregularities caused by his worrying, and there was nothing foreign in his bloodstream. What was wrong with him?

Conway finished his rounds as quickly as possible. He felt confused again. If his mind was playing tricks on him he was, going to take the necessary steps to rectify the matter. It must be something to do with the Telfi tape he had absorbed. O'Mara had said something about it, though he could not remember exactly what at the moment. But he would go to the Educator room right away, O'Mara or no O'Mara.

Two Monitors passed him while he was on the way, both armed. Conway knew that he should feel his usual hostility towards them, also shock that they were armed

inside a hospital, and he did. But he also wanted to slap their backs or even hug them: he desperately wanted to have people around, talking and exchanging ideas and impressions so that he would not feel so terribly alone. As they drew level with him Conway managed to get out a shaky "Hello." It was the first time he had spoken first to a Monitor in his life.

One of the Monitors smiled slightly, the other nodded. Both gave him odd looks over their shoulders as they passed because his teeth were chattering so much.

His intention of going to the Educator room had been clearly formed, but now it did not seem to be such a good idea. It was cold and dark there with all those machines and shaded lighting, and the only company might be O'Mara. Conway wanted to lose

himself in a crowd, and the bigger the better. He thought of the nearby dining hall and turned towards it. Then at an intersection he saw a sign reading "Diet Kitchen, Wards 52 to 68, Species DBDG, DBLF & FGLI." That made him remember how terribly cold he felt...

The Dietitians were too busy to notice him. Conway picked an oven which was fairly glowing with heat and lay down against it, letting the germ-killing ultra-violet which flooded the place bathe him and ignoring the charred smell given off by his light clothing. He felt warmer now, a little warmer, but the awful sense of being utterly and completely alone would not leave him. He was cut off, unloved and unwanted. He wished that he had never been born. When a Monitor – one of the two he had recently passed whose curiosity had been aroused by Conway's

strange behaviour – wearing a hastily borrowed heat suit belonging to one of the Cook-Dietitians got to him a few minutes later, the big, slow tears were running down Conway's cheeks...

"You," said a well-remembered voice, "are a very lucky and very stupid young man."

Conway opened his eyes to find that he was on the Erasure couch and that O'Mara and another Monitor were looking down at him. His back felt as though it had been cooked medium rare and his whole body stung as if with a bad dose of sunburn. O'Mara was glaring furiously at him, he spoke again: "Lucky not to be seriously burned and blinded, and stupid because you forgot to inform me on one very important point, namely, that this was your first experience with the Educator..."

O'Mara's tone became faintly self-accusatory at this point, but only faintly. He went on to say that had he been thus informed he would have given Conway a hypno-treatment which would have enabled the doctor to differentiate between his own needs and those of the Telfi sharing his mind. He only realised that Conway was a first-timer when he filed the thumb-printed slip, and dammit how was he to know who was new and who wasn't in a place this size! And anyway, if Conway had thought more of his job and less of the fact that a Monitor was giving him the tape, this would never have happened.

Conway, O'Mara continued bitingly, appeared to be a self-righteous bigot who made no pretence at hiding his feelings of defilement at the touch of an uncivilised brute of a Monitor. How a person intelligent

enough to gain appointment to this hospital could also hold those sort of feelings was beyond O'Mara's understanding.

Conway felt his face burning. It had been stupid of him to forget to tell the psychologist that he was a first-timer.

O'Mara could easily bring charges of personal negligence against him – a charge almost as serious as carelessness with a patient in a multi-environment hospital – and have Conway kicked out. But that possibility did not weigh too heavily with him at the moment, terrible though it was. 'What got him was the fact that he was being told off by a *Monitor*, and before another Monitor!

The man who must have carried him here was gazing down at him, a look of half-

humorous concern in his steady brown eyes. Conway found that harder to take even than O'Mara's abusiveness. How dare a Monitor feel sorry for *him!* "...And if you're still wondering what happened," O'Mara was saying in withering tones, "you allowed – through inexperience, I admit – the Telfi personality contained in the tape to temporarily overcome your own. Its need for hard radiation, intense heat and light and above all the mental fusion necessary to a group-mind entity, became your needs – transferred into their nearest human equivalents, of course. For a while you were experiencing life as a single Telfi being, and an individual Telfi – cut off from all mental contact with the others of its group – is an unhappy beastie indeed."

O'Mara had cooled somewhat as his explanation proceeded. His voice was almost impersonal as he went on, "You're

suffering from little more than a bad case of sunburn. Your back will be tender for a while and later it will itch. Serves you right. Now go away. I don't want to see you again until hour nine the day after tomorrow. Keep that hour free. That's an order — we have to have a little talk, remember?"

Outside in the corridor Conway had a feeling of complete deflation coupled with an anger that threatened to burst out of all control — an intensely frustrating combination. In all his twenty-three years of life he could not remember being subjected to such extreme mental discomfort. He had been made to feel like a small boy — a bad, maladjusted small boy. Conway had always been a very good, well-mannered boy. It hurt.

He had not noticed that his rescuer was still beside him until the other spoke.

"Don't go worrying yourself about the Major," the Monitor said sympathetically. "He's really a nice man, and when you see him again you'll find out for yourself. At the moment he's tired and a bit touchy. You see, there are three companies just arrived and more coming. But they won't be much use to us in their present state – they're in a bad way with combat fatigue, most of 'em. Major O'Mara and his staff have to give them some psychological first aid before – "

"Combat fatigue," said Conway in the most insulting tone of which he was capable. He was heartily sick of people he considered his intellectual and moral inferiors either ranting at him or sympathising with him. "I suppose," he added, "that means they've grown tired of killing people?"

He saw the Monitor's young-old face stiffen and something that was both hurt and anger burn in his eyes. He stopped. He opened his mouth for an O'Mara-type blast of invective, then thought better of it. He said quietly, "For someone who has been here for two months you have, to put it mildly, a very unrealistic attitude towards the Monitor Corps. I can't understand that. Have you been too busy to talk to people or something?"

"No," replied Conway coldly, "but where I come from we do not discuss persons of your type, we prefer pleasanter topics."

"I hope," said the Monitor, "that all your friends — if you have friends, that is — indulge in backslapping." He turned and marched off.

Conway winced in spite of himself at the thought of anything heavier than a feather hitting his scorched and tender back. But he was thinking of the other's earlier words, too. So his attitude towards Monitors was unrealistic? Did they want him, then, to condone violence and murder and befriend those who were responsible for it? And he had also mentioned the arrival of several companies of Monitors. Why? What for? Anxiety began to eat at the edges of his hitherto solid block of self-confidence. There was something here that he was missing, something important.

When he had first arrived at Sector General the being who had given Conway his original instructions and assignments had added a little pep-talk. It had said that Dr. Conway had passed a great many tests to come here and that they welcomed him and hoped he would be happy enough in

his work to stay. The period of trial was now over, and henceforth nobody would be trying to catch him out, but if for any reason – friction with his own or any other species, or the appearance of some xenological psychosis – he became so distressed that he could no longer stay, then with great reluctance he would be allowed to leave.

He had also been advised to meet as many different entities as possible and try to gain mutual understanding, if not their friendship. Finally he had been told that if he should get into trouble through ignorance or any other reason, he should contact either of two Earth-human beings who were called O'Mara and Bryson, depending on the nature of his trouble, though a qualified being of any species would, of course, help him on request.

Immediately afterwards he had met the

Surgeon-in-Charge of the wards to which he had been posted, a very able Earth-human called Mannon. Dr. Mannon was not yet a Diagnostician, though he was trying hard, and was therefore still quite human for long periods during the day. He was the proud possessor of a small dog which stuck so close to him that visiting extra-terrestrials were inclined to assume a symbolic relationship. Conway liked Dr. Mannon a lot, but now he was beginning to realise that his superior was the only being of his own species towards whom he had any feeling of friendship.

That was a bit strange, surely. It made Conway begin to wonder about himself.

After that reassuring pep-talk Conway had thought he was all set – especially when he found how easy it was to make friends with the E-T members of the Staff. He had

not warmed to his human colleagues – with the one exception – because of their tendency to be flippant or cynical regarding the very important and worthwhile work he, and they, were doing. But the idea of friction developing was laughable.

That was before today, though, when O'Mara had made him feel small and stupid, accused him of bigotry and intolerance, and generally cut his ego to pieces. This, quite definitely, was friction developing, and if such treatment at the hands of Monitors continued Conway knew that he would be driven to leave. He was a civilised and ethical human being – why were the Monitors in a position to tell him off? Conway just could not understand it at all. Two things he did know, however; he wanted to remain at the hospital, and to do that he needed help.

Chapter Four

The name 'Bryson' popped into his mind suddenly, one of the names he had been given should he get into trouble. O'Mara, the other name, was out, but this Bryson now...

Conway had never met anyone with that name, but by asking a passing Tralthan he received directions for finding him. He got only as far as the door, which bore the legend, "Captain Bryson, Monitor Corps, Chaplain," then he turned angrily away. Another Monitor! There was just one

person left who might help him: Dr. Mannon. He should have tried him first.

But his superior, when Conway ran him down, was sealed in the LSVO theatre where he was assisting a Tralthan Surgeon-Diagnostician in a very tricky piece of work. He went up to the observation gallery to wait until Mannon had finished.

The LSVO came from a planet of dense atmosphere and negligible gravity. It was a winged life-form of extreme fragility, which necessitated the theatre being at almost zero gravity and the surgeons strapped to their position around the table. The little OTSB who lived in symbiosis with the elephantine Tralthan was not strapped down, but held securely above the operative field by one of its host's secondary tentacles – the OTSB life-form,

Conway knew, could not lose physical contact with its host for more than a few minutes without suffering severe mental damage. Interested despite his own troubles, he began to concentrate on what they were doing.

A section of the patient's digestive tract had been bared, revealing a spongy, bluish growth adhering to it. Without the LSVO physiology tape Conway could not tell whether the patient's condition was serious or not, but the operation was certainly a technically difficult one. He could tell by the way Marmon hunched forward over it and by the tightly-coiled tentacles of the Tralthan not then in use. As was normal, the little OTSB with its cluster of wire-thin, eye and sucker-tipped tentacles was doing the fine, exploratory work — sending infinitely detailed visual information of the field to its giant host, and receiving back

instructions based on that data. The Tralthan and Dr. Mannon attended to the relatively crude work of clamping, tying-off and swabbing out.

Dr. Mannon had little to do but watch as the super-sensitive tentacles of the Tralthan's parasite were guided in their work by the host, but Conway knew that the other was proud of the chance to do even that. The Tralthan combination were the greatest surgeons the Galaxy had ever known. All surgeons would have been Tralthan had not their bulk and operating procedure made it impossible to treat certain forms of life.

Conway was waiting when they came out of the theatre. One of the Tralthan's tentacles flicked out and tapped Dr. Mannon sharply on the head – a gesture which was a high compliment – and

immediately a small bundle of fur and teeth streaked from behind a locker towards the great being who was apparently attacking its master. Conway had seen this game played out many times and it still seemed wildly ludicrous to him. As Mannon's dog barked furiously at the creature towering above both itself and its master, challenging it to a duel to the death, the Tralthan shrank back in mock terror and cried, "Save me from this fearsome beast!" The dog, still barking furiously, circled it, snapping at the leathery tegument protecting the Tralthan's six, blocky legs. The Tralthan retreated precipitously, the while calling loudly for aid and being very careful that its tiny attacker was not splattered under one of its elephantine feet. And so the sounds of battle receded down the corridor.

When the noise had diminished sufficiently

for him to be heard, Conway said, "Doctor, I wonder if you could help me. I need advice, or at least information. But it's a rather delicate matter..."

Conway saw Dr. Mannon's eyebrows go up and a smile quirk the corners of his mouth. He said, "I'd be glad to help you, of course, but I'm afraid any advice I could give you at the moment would be pretty poor stuff." He made a disgusted face and flapped his arms up and down. "I've still got an LSVO tape working on me. You know how it is — half of me thinks I'm a bird and the other half is a little confused about it. But what sort of advice do you need?" he went on, his head perking to one side in an oddly birdlike manner. "If it's that peculiar form of madness called young love, or any other psychological disturbance, I'd suggest you see O'Mara."

Conway shook his head quickly; anybody but O'Mara. He said, "No. It's more of a philosophical nature, a matter of ethics, maybe..."

"Is *that* all!" Mannon burst out. He was about to say something more when his face took on a fixed, listening expression. With a sudden jerk of his thumb he indicated *a* nearby wall annunciator. He said quietly, "The solution to your weighty problems will have to wait — you're wanted."

"...Dr. Conway," the annunciator was saying briskly, "Go to room 87 and administer pep-shots..."

"But 87 isn't even in our section!" Conway protested. "What's going on here...?"

Dr. Mannon had become suddenly grim. "I think I know," he said, "and I advise you to keep a few of those shots for yourself because you are going to need them." He turned abruptly and hurried off, muttering something about getting a fast erasure before they started screaming for him, too.

Room 87 was the Casualty Section's staff recreation room, and when Conway arrived its tables, chairs and even parts of its floor were asprawl with green-clad Monitors, some of whom had not the energy to lift their heads when he came in. One figure pushed itself out of a chair with extreme difficulty and weaved towards him. It was another Monitor with a Major's insignia on his shoulders and the Staff and Serpents on his collar. He said, "Maximum dosage. Start with me," and began shrugging out of his tunic.

Conway looked around the room. There must have been nearly a hundred of them, all in stages of advanced exhaustion and their faces showing that tell-tale grey colouration.

He still did not feel well disposed towards Monitors, but these were, after a fashion, patients, and his duty was clear.

"As a doctor I advise strongly against this," Conway said gravely. "It's obvious that you've had pep-shots already – far too many of them. What you need is sleep – "

"Sleep?" said a voice somewhere. "What's that?"

"Quiet, Teirnan," said the Major tiredly, then to Conway; "And as a doctor I understand the risks. I suggest we waste

no more time."

Rapidly and expertly Conway set about administering the shots. Dull-eyed, bone-weary men lined up before him and five minutes later left the room with a spring in their step and their eyes too bright with artificial vitality. He had just finished when he heard his name over the annunciator again, ordering him to Lock Six to await instructions there. Lock Six, Conway knew, was one of the subsidiary entrances to the Casualty section.

While he was hurrying in that direction Conway realised suddenly that he was tired and hungry, but he did not get the chance to think about it for long. The annunciators were giving out a call for all junior interns to report to Casualty, and directions for adjacent wards to be evacuated where possible to other

accommodation. An alien gabble interspersed these messages as other species received similar instructions.

Obviously the Casualty section was being extended. But why, and where were all the casualties coming from? Conway's mind was a confused and rather tired question mark.

Chapter Five

At Lock Six a Tralthan Diagnostician was deep in conversation with two Monitors. Conway felt a sense of outrage at the sight of the highest and the lowest being so chummy together, then reflected with a touch of bitterness that nothing about this place could surprise him any more. There were two more Monitors beside the Lock's direct vision panel.

"Hello, Doctor," one of them said pleasantly. He nodded towards the viewport. "They're unloading at Locks Eight,

Nine and Eleven. We'll be getting our quota any minute now."

The big transparent panel framed an awesome sight: Conway had never seen so many ships together at one time. More than thirty sleek, silver needles, ranging from ten-man pleasure yachts to the gargantuan transports of the Monitor Corps wove a slowly, complicated pattern in and around each other as they waited permission to lock-on and unload.

"Tricky work, that," the Monitor observed.

Conway agreed. The repulsion fields which protected ships against collision with the various forms of cosmic detritus required plenty of space. Meteorite screens had to be set up a minimum of five miles away from the ship they protected if heavenly

bodies large and small were to be successfully deflected from them – farther away if it was a bigger ship. But the ships outside were a mere matter of hundreds of yards apart, and had no collision protection except the skill of their pilots. The pilots would be having a trying time at the moment.

But Conway had little time for sight-seeing before three Earth-human interns arrived. They were followed quickly by two of the red-furred DBDG's and a caterpillar-like DBLF, all wearing medical insignia. There came a heavy scrape of metal against metal, the lock tell-tales turned from red to green indicating that a ship was properly connected up, and the patients began to stream through.

Carried in stretchers by Monitors they were of two kinds only: DBDG's of the Earth-

human type and DBLF caterpillars. Conway's job, and that of the other doctors present, was to examine them and route them through to the proper department of Casualty for treatment. He got down to work, assisted by a Monitor who possessed all the attributes of a trained nurse except the insignia. He said his name was Williamson.

The sight of the first case gave Conway a shock – not because it was serious, but because of the nature of the injuries. The third made him stop so that his Monitor assistant looked at him questioningly.

"What sort of accident was this?" Conway burst out. "Multiple punctures, but the edge of the wounds cauterised. Lacerated punctures, as if from fragments thrown out by an explosion. How...?"

The Monitor said, "We kept it quiet, of course, but I thought here at least the rumour would have got to everybody." His lips tightened and the look that identified all Monitors to Conway deepened in his eyes. "They decided to have a war," he went on, nodding at the Earth-human and DBLF patients around them. "I'm afraid it got a little out of control before we were able to clamp down."

Conway thought sickly, *A war...!* Human beings from Earth, or an Earth-seeded planet, trying to kill members of the species that had so much in common with them. He had heard that there were such things occasionally, but had never really believed any intelligent species could go insane on such a large scale. So many *casualties...* He was not so bound up in his thoughts of loathing and disgust at this frightful business that he missed noticing a very

strange fact – that the Monitor's expression mirrored his own! If Williamson thought that way about war, too, maybe it was time he revised his thinking about the Monitor Corps in general.

A sudden commotion a few yards to his right drew Conway's attention. An Earth-human patient was objecting strenuously to the DBLF intern trying to examine him, and the language he was using was not nice. The DBLF was registering hurt bewilderment, though possibly the human had not sufficient knowledge of its physiognomy to know that, and trying to reassure the patient in flat, Translated tones.

It was Williamson who settled the business. He swung round on the loudly protesting patient, bent forward until their faces were only inches apart, and spoke in

a low, almost conversational tone which nevertheless sent shivers along Conway's spine.

"Listen, friend," he said, "you say you object to one of the stinking crawlers that tried to kill you trying to patch you up, right? Well, get this into your head, and keep it there – this particular crawler is a Doctor here. Also, in this establishment there are no wars. You all belong to the same army and the uniform is a night-shirt, so lay still, shut up and behave. Otherwise I'll clip you one."

Conway returned to work underlining his mental note about revising his thinking regarding Monitors. As the torn, battered and burnt life-forms flowed past under his hands his mind seemed strangely detached from it all. He kept surprising Williamson with expressions on his face

that seemed to give the lie to some of the things he had been told about Monitors. This tireless, quiet man with the rock-steady hands – was he a killer, a sadist of low intelligence and non-existent morals? It was hard to believe. As he watched the Monitor covertly between patients, Conway gradually came to a decision. It was a very difficult decision. If he wasn't careful he would very likely get clipped.

O'Mara had been impossible, so had Bryson and Mannon for various reasons, but Williamson now...

"Ah...er, Williamson," Conway began hesitantly, then finished with a rush, "have you ever killed anybody?"

The Monitor straightened suddenly, his lips a thin, bloodless line. He said tonelessly, "You should know better than to ask a

Monitor that question, Doctor. Or should you?" He hesitated, his curiosity keeping check on the anger growing in him because of the tangle of emotion which must have been mirrored on Conway's face, then said heavily, "What's eating you, Doc?"

Conway wished fervently that he had never asked the question, but it was too late to back out now. Stammering at first, he began to tell of his ideals of service and of his alarm and confusion on discovering that Sector General – an establishment which he had thought embodied all his high ideals – employed a Monitor as its Chief Psychologist, and probably – other members of the Corps in positions of responsibility. Conway knew now that the Corps was not all bad, that they had rushed units of their Medical Division here to aid them during the present emergency.

But even so, *Monitors...*! "I'll give you another shock," Williamson said dryly, "by telling you something that is so widely known that nobody thinks to mention it. Dr. Lister, the Director, also belongs to the Monitor Corps.

He doesn't wear uniform, of course," the Monitor added quickly, "because Diagnosticians grow forgetful and are careless about small things. The Corps frowns on untidiness, even in a Lieutenant-General."

Lister, a Monitor! "But, why?" Conway burst out in spite of himself. "Everybody knows what you are. How did you gain power here in the first place...?"

"Everybody does not know, obviously," Williamson cut in, "because you don't, for one."

Chapter Six

The Monitor was no longer angry, Conway saw as they finished with their current patient and moved to the next. Instead there was an expression on the other's face oddly reminiscent of a parent about to lecture an off-spring on some of the unpleasant facts of life.

"Basically," said Williamson as he gently peeled back a field dressing of a wounded DBLF, "your trouble is that you, and your whole social group, are a protected species."

Conway said "*What?*"

"A protected species," he repeated. "Shielded from the crudities of present-day life. From your social strata – on all the worlds of the Union, not only on Earth – come practically all the great artists, musicians and professional men. Most of you live out your lives in ignorance of the fact that you are protected, that you are insulated from childhood against the grosser realities of our interstellar so-called civilisation, and that your ideas of pacifism and ethical behaviour are a luxury which a great many of us simply cannot afford. You are allowed this luxury in the hope that from it may come a philosophy which may one day make every being in the Galaxy truly civilised, truly good."

"I didn't know," Conway stammered. "And... and you make us – me, I mean –

look so useless..."

"Of course you didn't know," said Williamson gently. Conway wondered why it was that such a young man could talk down to him without giving offence; he seemed to possess *authority* somehow. Continuing, he said, "You were probably reserved, untalkative and all wrapped up in your high ideals. Not that there's anything wrong with them, understand, it's just that you have to allow for a little grey with the black and white. Our present culture," he went on, returning to the main line of discussion, "is based on maximum freedom for the individual. An entity may do anything he likes provided it is not injurious to others. Only Monitors forgo this freedom."

"What about the 'Normals' reservations?" Conway broke in. At last the

Monitor had made a statement which he could definitely contradict. "Being policed by Monitors and confined to certain areas of country is not what I'd call freedom."

"If you think back carefully," Williamson replied, "I think you will find that the Normals – that is, the group on nearly every planet which thinks that, unlike the brutish Monitors and the spineless aesthetes of your own strata, it is truly representative of its species – are not confined. Instead they have naturally drawn together into communities, and it is in these communities of self-styled Normals that the Monitors have to be most active. The Normals possess all the freedom including the right to kill each other if that is what they desire, the Monitors being present only to see that any Normal not sharing this desire will not suffer in the process.

We also, when a sufficiently high pitch of mass insanity overtakes one or more of these worlds, allow a war to be fought on a planet set aside for that purpose, generally arranging things so that the war is neither long or too bloody." Williamson sighed. In tones of bitter self-accusation he concluded, "We underestimated them. This one was both."

Conway's mind was still baulking at this radically new slant on things. Before coming to the hospital he'd had no direct contact with Monitors, why should he? And the Normals of Earth he had found to be rather romantic figures, inclined to strut and swagger a bit, that was all. Of course, most of the bad things he had heard about Monitors had come from them. Maybe the Normals had not been as truthful or objective as they could have been...

"This is all too hard to believe," Conway protested. "You're suggesting that the Monitor Corps is greater in the scheme of things than either the Normals or ourselves, the professional class!" He shook his head angrily. "And anyway, this is a fine time for a philosophical discussion!"

"You," said the Monitor, "started it."

There was no answer to that.

It must have been hours later that Conway felt a touch on his shoulder and straightened to find a DBLF nurse behind him. The being was holding a hypodermic. It said, "Pep-shot, Doctor?"

All at once Conway realised how wobbly his legs had become and how hard it was

to focus his eyes. And he must have been noticeably slowing down for the nurse to approach him in the first place. He nodded and rolled up his sleeve with fingers which felt like thick, tired sausages.

"Yipe!" he cried in sudden anguish. "What are you using, a six-inch nail?"

"I am sorry," said the DBLF, "but I have injected two doctors of my own species before coming to you, and as you know our tegument is thicker and more closely grained than yours is. The needle has therefore become blunted."

Conway's fatigue dropped away in seconds. Except for a slight tingling in hands and feet and a greyish blotching which only others could see in his face he felt as clear-eyed, alert and physically refreshed as if he had just come out of a

shower after ten hours sleep. He took a quick look round before finishing his current examination and saw that here at least the number of patients awaiting attention had shrunk to a mere handful, and the number of Monitors in the room was less than half what it had been at the start. The patients were being taken care of, and the Monitors had become patients.

He had seen it happening all around him. Monitors who had had little or no sleep on the transports coming here, forcing themselves to carry on helping the overworked medics of the hospital with repeated pep-shots and sheer, dogged courage. One by one they had literally dropped in their tracks and been taken hurriedly away, so exhausted that the involuntary muscles of heart and lungs had given up with everything else. They lay in special wards with robot devices

massaging their hearts, giving artificial respiration and feeding them through a vein in the leg. Conway had heard that only one of them had died.

Taking advantage of the lull, Conway and Williamson moved to the direct vision panel and looked out. The waiting swarm of ships seemed only slightly smaller, though he knew that these must be new arrivals. He could not imagine where they were going to put these people – even the habitable corridors in the hospital were beginning to overflow now, and there was constant rearranging of patients of all species to make more room. But that wasn't his problem, and the weaving pattern of ships was an oddly restful sight...

"Emergency," said the wall annunciator suddenly. "Single ship, one occupant, species as yet unknown requests

immediate treatment. Occupant is in only partial control of its ship, is badly injured and communications are incoherent. Stand by at all admittance locks....!"

Oh, no, Conway thought, not at a time like this! There was a cold sickness in his stomach and he had a horrible premonition of what was going to happen. Williamson's knuckles shone white as he gripped the edge of the view-port. "Look!" he said in a flat, despairing tone, and pointed.

An intruder was approaching the waiting swarm of ships at an insane velocity and on a wildly erratic course. A stubby, black and featureless torpedo shape, it reached and penetrated the weaving mass of ships before Conway had time to take two breaths. In milling confusion the ships scattered, narrowly avoiding collision both with it and each other, and still it hurtled on.

There was only one ship in its path now, a Monitor transport which had been given the all-clear to approach and was drifting in towards an admittance lock. The transport was big, ungainly and not built for fast acrobatics – it had neither the time nor the ability to get out of the way. A collision was certain, and the transport was jammed with wounded...

But no. At the last possible instant the hurtling ship swerved. They saw it miss the transport and its stubby torpedo shape foreshorten to a circle which grew in size with heart-stopping rapidity. Now it was headed straight at them! Conway wanted to shut his eyes, but there was a peculiar fascination about watching that great mass of metal rushing at him. Neither Williamson nor himself made any attempt to jump for a spacesuit – what was to happen was only split seconds away.

The ship was almost on top of them when it swerved again as its injured pilot sought desperately to avoid this greater obstacle, the hospital. But too late, the ship struck.

A smashing double-shock struck up at them from the floor as the ship tore through their double skin, followed by successively milder shocks as it bludgeoned its way into the vitals of the great hospital. A cacophony of screams – both human and alien – arose briefly, also whistlings, rustlings and guttural jabberings as beings were maimed, drowned, gassed or decompressed. Water poured into sections containing pure chlorine. A blast of ordinary air rushed through a gaping hole in the compartment whose occupants had never known anything but trans-Plutonian cold and vacuum – the beings shrivelled, died and dissolved horribly at the first touch

of it. Water, air and a score of different atmospheric mixtures intermingled forming a sludgy, brown and highly corrosive mixture that steamed and bubbled its way out into space. But long before that had happened the air-tight seals had slammed shut, effectively containing the terrible wound made by that bulleting ship.

Chapter Seven

There was an instant of shocked paralysis, then the hospital reacted. Above their heads the annunciator went into a quiet, controlled frenzy. Engineers and Maintenance men of all species were to report for assignment immediately. The gravity neutraliser grids in the LSVO and MSVK wards were failing – all medical staff in the area were to encase the patients in protective envelopes and transfer them to DBLF theatre Two, where one-twentieth G Conditions were being set up, before they were crushed by their own weight. There was an untraced leak in AUGL corridor.

Nineteen, and all DBDG's were warned of chlorine contamination in the area of their dining hall. Also, Dr. Lister was asked to report himself, please.

In an odd corner of his mind Conway noted how everybody else was ordered to their assignments while Dr. Lister was asked. Suddenly he heard his name being called and he swung around.

It was Dr. Mannon. He hurried up to Williamson and Conway and said, "I see you're free at the moment. There's a job I'd like you to do." He paused to receive Conway's nod, then plunged on breathlessly.

When the crashing ship had dug a hole half-way through the hospital, Mannon explained, the volume sealed off by the

safety doors was not confined simply to the tunnel of wreckage it had created. The position of the doors was responsible for this – the result being analogous to a great tree of vacuum extending into the hospital structure, with the tunnel created by the ship as its trunk and the open sections of corridors leading off it the branches. Some of these airless corridors served compartments which themselves could be sealed off, and it was possible that these might contain survivors.

Normally there would be no necessity to hurry the rescue of these beings, they would be quite comfortable where they were for days, but in this instance there was an added complication. The ship had come to rest near the centre – the nerve centre, in fact – of the hospital, the section which contained the controls for the artificial gravity settings of the entire

structure. At the moment there seemed to be a survivor in that section somewhere – possibly a patient, a member of the Staff or even the occupant of the wrecked ship – who was moving around and unknowingly damaging the gravity control mechanisms. This state of affairs, if continued, could create havoc in the wards and might even cause deaths among the light-gravity life-forms.

Dr. Mannon wanted them to go in and bring the being concerned out before it unwittingly wrecked the place.

"A PVSJ has already gone in," Mannon added, "but that species is awkward in a spacesuit, so I'm sending you two as well to hurry things along. All right? Hop to it, then."

Wearing gravity neutraliser packs they

exited near the damaged section and drifted along the Hospital's outer skin to the twenty-foot wide hole gouged in its side by the crashing ship. The packs allowed a high degree of manoeuvrability in weightless conditions, and they did not expect anything else along the route they were to travel. They also carried ropes and magnetic anchors, and Williamson – solely because it was part of the equipment issued with the Service Standard suit, he said – also carried a gun. Both had air for three hours.

At first the going was easy. The ship had sheared a clean-edged tunnel through ward bulkheads, deck plating and even through items of heavy machinery. Conway could see clearly into the corridors they passed in their descent, and nowhere was there a sign of life. There were grisly remnants of a high-pressure life-form

which would have blown itself apart even under Earth-normal atmospheric conditions. When subjected suddenly to hard vacuum the process had been that much more violent. And in one corridor there was disclosed a tragedy; a near-human DBDG nurse – one of the red, bear-like entities – had been neatly decapitated by the closing of an air-tight door which it had just failed to make in time. For some reason the sight affected him more than anything else he had seen that day.

Increasing amounts of 'foreign' wreckage hampered their progress as they continued to descend – plating and structural members torn from the crashing ship – so that there were times when they had to clear a way through it with their hands and feet.

Williamson was in the lead – about ten

yards below Conway that was – when the Monitor flicked out of sight. In the suit radio a cry of surprise was abruptly cut off by the clang of metal against metal. Conway's grip on the projecting beam he had been holding tightened instinctively in shocked surprise, and he felt it vibrate through his gauntlets. The wreckage was shifting! Panic took him for a moment until he realised that most of the movement was taking place back the way he had come, above his head. The vibration ceased a few minutes later without the debris around him significantly changing its position. Only then did Conway tie his line securely to the beam and look around for the Monitor.

Knees bent and arms in front of his head Williamson lay face downward partially embedded in a shelving mass of loose wreckage some twenty feet below. Faint, irregular sounds of breathing in his phones

told Conway that the Monitor's quick thinking in wrapping his arms around his head had, by protecting his suit's fragile face-plate, saved his life. But whether or not Williamson lived for long or not depended on the nature of his other injuries, and they in turn depended on the amount of gravitic attraction in the floor section which had sucked him down.

It was now obvious that the accident was due to a square of deck in which the artificial gravity grid was, despite the wholesale destruction of circuits in the crash area, still operative. Conway was profoundly thankful that the attraction was exerted only at right angles to the grid's surface and that the floor section had been warped slightly. Had it been facing straight up then both the Monitor and himself would have dropped, and from a distance considerably greater than twenty feet.

Carefully paying out his safety line Conway approached the huddled form of Williamson. His grip tightened convulsively on the rope when he came within the field of influence of the gravity grid, then eased as he realised that its power was at most only one and a half G's. With a steady attraction now pulling him downwards towards the Monitor, Conway began lowering himself hand over hand. He could have used his neutraliser pack to counteract that pull, of course, and just drifted down, but that would have been risky. If he accidentally passed out of the floor section's area of influence, then the pack would have flung him upwards again, with probably fatal results.

The Monitor was still unconscious when Conway reached him, and though he could not tell for sure, owing to the other wearing

a spacesuit, he suspected multiple fractures in both arms. As he gently disengaged the limp figure from the surrounding wreckage it was suddenly borne on him that Williamson needed attention, immediate attention with all the resources the hospital could provide. He had just realised that the Monitor had been the recipient of a large number of pep-shots; his reserves of strength must be gone. When he regained consciousness, if he ever did, he might not be able to withstand the shock.

Chapter Eight

Conway was about to call through for assistance when a chunk of ragged-edged metal spun past his helmet. He swung round just in time to duck another piece of wreckage which was sailing towards him. Only then did he see the outlines of a non-human, space-suited figure which was partially hidden in a tangle of metal about ten yards away. The being was throwing things at him!

The bombardment stopped as soon as the other saw that Conway had noticed it. With

visions of having found the unknown survivor whose blundering about was playing hob with the hospital's artificial gravity system he hurried across to it. But he saw immediately that the being was incapable of doing any moving about at all, it was pinned down, but miraculously unhurt, by a couple of heavy structural members. It was also making vain attempts to reach round to the back of its suit with its only free appendage. Conway was puzzled for a moment, then he saw the radio pack which was strapped to the being's back, and the lead dangling loose from it. Using surgical tape he repaired the break and immediately the flat, Translated tones of the being filled his ear-phones.

It was the PVSJ who had left before them to search the wrecked area for survivors. Caught by the same trap which had snagged the unfortunate Monitor, it had

been able to use its gravity pack to check its sudden fall. Over-compensating, it had crashed into its present position. The crash had been relatively gentle, but it had caused some loose wreckage to subside, trapping the being and damaging its radio.

The PVSJ – a chlorine-breathing Illensan – was solidly planted in the wreckage: Conway's attempts to free it were useless. While trying, however, he got a look at the professional insignia painted on the other's suit. The Tralthan and Illensan symbols meant nothing to Conway, but the third one – which was the nearest expression of the beings function in Earth-human terms – was a crucifix. The being was a padre. Conway might have expected that.

But now Conway had two immobilised cases instead of one. He thumbed the transmit switch of his radio and cleared his

throat. Before he could speak the harsh, urgent voice of Dr. Mannon *was* dining in his ears.

"Dr. Conway! Corpsman Williamson! One of you, report quickly, please!"

Conway said, "I was just going to," and gave an account of his troubles to date and requested aid for the Monitor and the PVSJ padre. Mannon cut him off.

"I'm sorry," he said hurriedly, "but we can't help you. The gravity fluctuations have been getting worse here, they must have caused a subsidence in your tunnel, because it's solidly plugged with wreckage all the way above you. Maintenance men have tried to cut a way through but – "

"Let me talk to him," broke in another

voice, and there were the magnified, fumbling noises of a mike being snatched out of someone's hand. "Dr. Conway, this is Dr. Lister speaking," it went on. "I'm afraid that I must tell you that the well-being of your two accident cases is of secondary importance. Your job is to contact that being in the gravity control compartment and stop him. Hit him on the head if necessary, but stop him — he's wrecking the hospital!"

Conway swallowed. He said, "Yes, sir," and began looking for a way to penetrate further into the tangle of metal surrounding him. It looked hopeless.

Suddenly he felt himself being pulled sideways. He grabbed for the nearest solid looking projection and hung on for dear life. Transmitted through the fabric of his suit he heard the grinding, tearing jangle of

moving metal. The wreckage was shifting again. Then the force pulling him disappeared as suddenly as it had come and simultaneously there came a peculiar, barking cry from the PVSJ. Conway twisted round to see that where the Illensan had been a large hole led downward into nothingness.

He had to force himself to let go of his handhold. The attraction which had seized him had been due, Conway knew, to the momentary activating of an artificial gravity grid somewhere below. If it returned while he was floating unsupported... Conway did not want to think about that. The shift had not affected Williamson's position – he still lay as Conway had left him – but the PVSJ must have fallen through.

"Are you all right?" Conway called anxiously.

"I think so," came the reply. "I am still somewhat numb."

Cautiously, Conway drifted across to the newly-created opening and looked down. Below him was a very large compartment, well-lit from a source somewhere off to one side.

Only the floor was visible about forty feet below, the walls being beyond his angle of vision and this was thickly carpeted by a dark blue, tubular growth with bulbous leaves.

The purpose of this compartment baffled Conway until he realised that he was looking at the AUGL tank minus its water. The thick, flaccid growth covering its floor served both as food and interior decoration

for the AUGL patients. the PVSJ had been very lucky to have such a springy surface to land on.

The PVSJ was no longer pinned down by wreckage and it stated that it felt fit enough to help Conway with the being in the gravity control department. As they were about to resume the descent Conway glanced towards the source of light he had half-noticed earlier, and caught his breath.

One wall of the AUGL tank was transparent and looked out on a section corridor which had been converted into a temporary ward. DBLF caterpillars lay in the beds which lined one side, and they were by turns crushed savagely into the plastifoam and bounced upwards into the air by it as violent and random fluctuations rippled along the gravity grids in the floor. Netting had been hastily tied around the patients to

keep them in the beds, but despite the beating they were taking they were the lucky ones.

A ward was being evacuated somewhere and through this stretch of corridor there crawled, wriggled and hopped a procession of beings resembling the contents of some cosmic Ark. All the oxygen-breathing life-forms were represented together with many who were not, and human nursing orderlies and Monitors shepherded them along. Experience must have taught the orderlies that to stand or walk upright was asking for broken bones and cracked skulls, because they were crawling' along on their hands and knees. When a sudden surge of three or four G's caught them they had a shorter distance to fall that way. Most of them were wearing gravity packs, Conway saw, but had given them up as useless in conditions

where the gravity constant was a wild variable.

He saw PVSJ's in balloon-like chlorine envelopes being pinned against the floor, flattened like specimens pressed under glass, then bounced into the air again. And Tralthan patients in their massive, unwieldy harnesses – Tralthans were prone to injury internally despite their great strength – being dragged along. There were DBDG's, DBLF's and CLSR's, also unidentifiable some things in spherical, wheeled containers that radiated cold almost visibly. Strung out in a line, being pushed, dragged or manfully inching along on their own, the beings crept past, bowing and straightening up again like wheat in a strong wind as the gravity grids pulled at them.

Conway could almost imagine he felt those

fluctuations where he stood, but knew that the crashing ship must have destroyed the grid circuits in its path. He dragged his eyes away from that grim procession and headed downwards again.

"Conway!" Mannon's voice barked at him a few minutes later. "That survivor down there is responsible for as many casualties now as the crashed ship! A ward of convalescent LSVO's are dead due to a three-second surge from one-eighth to four gravities. What's happening now?"

The tunnel of wreckage was steadily narrowing, Conway reported, the hull and lighter machinery of the ship having been peeled away by the time it had reached their present level. All that could remain ahead was the massive stuff like hyperdrive generators and so on. He thought he must be very near the end of

the line now, and the being who was the unknowing cause of the devastation around them.

"Good," said Marmon, "but hurry it up!"

"But can't the Engineers get through? Surely – "

"They can't," broke in Dr. Lister's voice. "In the area surrounding the gravity grid controls there are fluctuations of up to ten G's. It's impossible. And joining up with your route from inside the hospital is out, too. It would mean evacuating corridors in the neighbouring area, and the corridors are all filled with patients..." The voice dropped in volume as Dr. Lister apparently turned away from the mike, and Conway overheard him saying, "Surely an intelligent being could not be so panic-stricken that it... it... Oh, when I get my hands on it – "

"It may not be intelligent," put in another voice. "Maybe it's a cub, from the FGLI maternity unit..."

"If it is I'll tan its little — "

A sharp click ended the conversation at that point as the transmitter was switched off. Conway, suddenly realising what a very important man he had become, tried to hurry it up as best he could.

Chapter Nine

They dropped another level into a ward in which four MSVK's – fragile, tri-pedal stork-like beings – drifted lifeless among loose items of ward equipment. Movements of the bodies and objects in the room seemed a little unnatural, as if they had been recently disturbed. It was the first sign of the enigmatic survivor they were seeking. Then they were in a great, metal-walled compartment, surrounded by a maze of plumbing and unshielded machinery. On the floor in a bulge it had created for itself, the ship's massive hyper-drive generator lay with some shreds of control-room

equipment strewn around it. Underneath was the remains of a life-form that was now unclassifiable. Beside the generator another hole had been torn in the severely weakened floor by some other piece of the ship's heavy equipment.

Conway hurried over to it, looked down, then called excitedly, "There it is!"

They were looking into a vast room which could only be the grid control centre. Rank upon rank of squat, metal cabinets covered the floor, walls and ceiling – this compartment was always kept airless and at zero gravity – with barely room for even Earth-human Engineers to move between them. But Engineers were seldom needed here because the devices in this all-important compartment were self-repairing. At the moment this ability was being put to a severe test.

A being which Conway classified tentatively as AACL sprawled across three of the delicate control cabinets. Nine other cabinets, all winking with red distress signals, were within range of its six, python-like tentacles which poked through seals in the cloudy plastic of its suit. The tentacles were at least twenty feet long and tipped with a horny substance which must have been steel-hard considering the damage the being had caused.

Conway had been prepared to feel pity for this hapless survivor, he had expected to find an entity injured, panic-stricken and crazed with pain. Instead there was a being who appeared unhurt and who was viciously smashing up gravity-grid controls as fast as the built-in self-repairing robots tried to fix them. Conway swore and began hunting for the frequency of the other's suit

radio. Suddenly there was a harsh, high-pitched cheeping sound in his ear-phones. "Got you!" Conway said grimly.

The cheeping sounds ceased abruptly as the other heard his voice and so did all movement of those highly destructive tentacles. Conway noted the wavelength, then switched back to the band used by the PVSJ and himself.

"It seems to me," said the chlorine-breather when he had told it what he had heard, "that the being is deeply afraid, and the noises it made were of fear – otherwise your Translator would have made you receive them as words in your own language. The fact that these noises and its destructive activity stopped when it heard your voice is promising, but I think that we should approach slowly and reassure it constantly that we are bringing

help. Its activity down there gives me the impression that it has been hitting, out at anything which moves, so a certain amount of caution is indicated, I think."

"Yes, Padre," said Conway with great feeling.

"We do not know in what direction the being's visual organs are directed," the PVSJ went on, "so I suggest we approach from opposite sides."

Conway nodded. They set their radios to the new band and climbed carefully down onto the ceiling of the compartment below. With just enough power in their gravity neutralisers to keep them pressed gently against the metal surface they moved away from each other onto opposite walls, down them, then onto the floor. With the being between them now, they moved slowly

towards it.

The robot repair devices were busy making good the damage wrecked by those six anacondas it used for limbs but the being continued to lie quiescent. Neither did it speak. Conway kept thinking of the havoc this entity had caused with its senseless threshing about. The things he felt like saying to it were anything but reassuring, so he let the PVSJ padre do the talking.

"Do not be afraid," the other was saying for the twentieth time. "If you are injured, tell us. We are here to help you..."

But there was neither movement nor reply from the being.

On a sudden impulse Conway switched to Dr. Mansion's band. He said quickly, "The

survivor seems to be an AACL. Can you tell me what it's here for, or any reason why it should refuse or be unable to talk to us?"

"I'll check with Reception," said Mannon after a short pause. "But are you sure of that classification? I can't remember seeing an AACL here, sure it isn't a Creppelian – "

"It isn't a Creppelian octopoid," Conway cut in. "There are *six* main appendages, and it is just lying here doing nothing..."

Conway stopped suddenly, shocked into silence, because it was no longer true that the being under discussion was doing nothing. It had launched itself towards the ceiling, moving so fast that it seemed to land in the same instant that it had taken off. Above him now, Conway saw another control unit pulverised as the being struck and others torn from their mounts as its

tentacles sought anchorage. In his phones Mansion was shouting about gravity fluctuations in a hitherto stable section of the hospital, and mounting casualty figures, but Conway was unable to reply.

He was watching helplessly as the AACL prepared to launch itself again.

"...We are here to help you," the PVSJ was saying as the being landed with a soundless crash four yards from the padre. Five great tentacles anchored themselves firmly, and a sixth lashed out in a great, curving blur of motion that caught the PVSJ and smashed it against the wall. Life-giving chlorine spurted from the PVSJ's suit, momentarily hiding in mist the shapeless, pathetic thing which rebounded slowly into the middle of the room. The AACL began making cheeping noises again.

Conway heard himself babbling out a report to Mannon, then Mannon shouting for Lister. Finally the Director's voice came to him. It said thickly, "You've got to kill it, Conway."

You've got to kill it, Conway! It was those words which shocked Conway back to a state of normality as nothing else could have done. How very like a Monitor, he thought bitterly, to solve a problem with a murder. And to ask a doctor, a person dedicated to the preserving of life, to do the killing. It did not matter that the being was insane with fear, it had caused a lot of trouble in the hospital, so kill it.

Conway had been afraid, he still was. In his recent state of mind he might have been panicked into using this kill-or-be-killed law of the jungle. Not now, though. No matter what happened to him or the hospital he

would not kill an intelligent fellow being, and Lister could shout himself blue in the face...

It was with a start of surprise that Conway realised that both Lister and Mannon were shouting at him, and trying to counter his arguments. He must have been doing his thinking aloud without knowing it. Angrily he tuned them out.

But there was still another voice gibbering at him, a slow, whispering, unutterably weary voice that frequently broke off to gasp in pain. For a wild moment Conway thought that the ghost of the dead PVSJ was continuing Lister's arguments, then he caught sight of movement above him.

Drifting gently through the hole in the ceiling was the space-suited figure of

Williamson. How the badly injured Monitor had got there at all was beyond Conway's understanding – his broken arms made control of his gravity pack impossible, so that he must have come all that way by kicking with his feet and trusting that a still-active gravity grid would not pull him in a second time. At the thought of how many times those multiply fractured members must have collided with obstacles on the way down, Conway cringed. And yet all the Monitor was concerned with was trying to coax Conway into killing the AACL below him.

Close below him, with the distance lessening every second...

Conway felt the cold sweat break out on his back. Helpless to stop himself, the injured Monitor had cleared the rent in the ceiling and was drifting slowly floorwards,

directly on top of the crouching AACL! As Conway stared fascinated one of the steel-hard tentacles began to uncurl preparatory to making a death-dealing swipe.

Instinctively Conway launched himself in the direction of the floating Monitor, there was no time for him to feel consciously brave – or stupid – about the action. *He* connected with a muffled crash and hung on, wrapping his legs around Williamson's waist to leave his hands free for the gravity pack controls. They spun furiously around their common centre of gravity, walls, ceiling and floor with its deadly occupant whirling round so fast that Conway could barely focus his eyes on the controls. It seemed years before he finally had the spin checked and he had them headed for the hole in the ceiling and safety. They had – almost reached it when Conway saw the hawser-like tentacle come sweeping up at him...

Chapter Ten

Something smashed into his back with a force that knocked the breath out of him. For a heart-freezing moment he thought his air-tanks had gone, his suit torn open and that he was already sucking frenziedly at vacuum. But his gasp of pure terror brought air rushing into his lungs. Conway had never known canned air to taste so good.

The AACL's tentacle had only caught him a glancing blow – his back wasn't broken – and the only damage was a wrecked suit

radio.

"Are you all right?" Conway asked anxiously when he had Williamson settled in the compartment above. He had to press his helmet against the other's — that was the only way he could make himself heard now.

For several minutes there was no reply, then the weary, pain-wracked near-whisper returned.

"My arms hurt. I'm tired," it said haltingly. "But I'll be OK when... they take me... inside." Williamson paused, his voice seemed to gather strength from somewhere and he went on, "That is if there is anybody left alive in the hospital to treat me. If you don't stop our friend down there..."

Sudden anger flared in Conway. "Dammit, do you never give up?" he burst out. "Get this, I'm not going to kill an intelligent being! My radio's gone so I don't have to listen to Lister and Mannon yammering at me, and all I've got to do to shut you up is pull my helmet away from yours."

The Monitor's voice had weakened again. He said, "I can still hear Mannon and Lister. They say the wards in Section Eight have been hit now – that's the other low-gravity section. Patients and doctors both are pinned flat to the floor under three G's. A few more minutes like that and they'll never get up – MSVK's aren't at all sturdy, you know..."

"Shut up!" yelled Conway. Furiously, he pulled away from contact.

When his anger had abated enough for him

to see again, Conway observed that the Monitor's lips were no longer moving. Williamson's eyes were closed, his face grey and sweaty with shock and he did not seem to be breathing. The drying chemicals in his helmet kept the face-plate from fogging, so that Conway could not tell for sure but the Monitor could very easily be dead. With exhaustion held off by repeated pep-shots, then his injuries on top of that, Conway had expected him to be dead long since. For some peculiar reason Conway felt his eyes stinging.

He had seen so much death and dismemberment over the last few hours that his sensitivity to suffering in others had been blunted to the point where he reacted to it merely as a medical machine. This feeling of loss, of bereavement, for the Monitor must be simply a resurgence of that sensitivity, and temporary. Of one

thing he was sure, however, nobody was going to make this medical machine commit a murder. The Monitor Corps, Conway now knew, was responsible for a lot more good than bad, but he was not a Monitor.

Yet O'Mara and Lister were both Monitors and Doctors, one of them renowned throughout the Galaxy. Are you better than they are? a little voice nagged in his mind somewhere. And you're all alone now, it went on, with the hospital disorganised and people dying all over the place because of that being down there. What do you think your chances of survival are? The way you came is plugged with wreckage and nobody can come to your aid, so you're going to die, too. Isn't that so?

Desperately Conway tried to hang on to his resolution, to draw it tightly around him like

a shell. But that insistent, that cowardly, voice in his brain was putting cracks in it. It was with a sense of pure relief that he saw the Monitor's lips moving again. He touched helmets quickly.

"...Hard for you, a Doctor," the voice came faintly, "but you've got to. Just suppose you were that being down below, driven mad with fear and pain maybe, and for a moment you became sane and somebody told you what you had done – what you were doing, and the deaths you had caused..." The voice wavered, sank, then returned.

"Wouldn't you *want* to *die* rather than go on killing?"

"But I *can't*...!"

"Wouldn't you *want* to die, in its place?"

Conway felt the defensive shell of his resolution begin to disintegrate around him. He said desperately, in a last attempt to hold firm, to stave off the awful decision, "Well, maybe, but I couldn't kill it even if I tried – it would tear me to pieces before I got near it..."

"I've got a gun," said the Monitor.

Conway could not remember adjusting the firing controls, or even taking the weapon from the Monitor's holster. It was in his hand and trained on the AACL below, and Conway felt sick and cold. But he had not given in to Williamson completely. Near at hand was a sprayer of the fast-setting plastic which, when used quickly enough, could sometimes save a person whose suit had been holed. Conway planned to wound the being, immobilise it, then re-seal its suit

with cement. It would be a close thing and risky to himself, but he would not deliberately kill the being.

Carefully he brought his other hand up to steady the gun and took aim. He fired.

When he lowered it there was not much left except shredded twitching pieces of tentacles scattered all over the room. Conway wished now that he had known more about guns, known that this one shot explosive bullets, and that it had been set for continuous automatic fire. Williamson's lips were moving again. Conway touched helmets out of pure reflex. He was past caring about anything any more.

"...It's all right, Doctor," the Monitor was saying. "It isn't anybody..."

"It isn't anybody now," Conway agreed. He went back to examining the Monitor's gun and wishing that it wasn't empty. If there had been one bullet left, just one, he knew how he would have used it.

"It was hard, we know that," said Major O'Mara. The rasp was no longer in his voice and the iron-grey eyes were soft with sympathy, and something akin to pride. "A doctor doesn't have to make a decision like that usually until he's older, more balanced, mature, if ever. You are, or were, just an over-idealistic kid – a bit on the smug and self-righteous side maybe – who didn't even know what a Monitor really was."

O'Mara smiled. His two big, hard hands rested on Conway's shoulders in an oddly fatherly gesture. He went on, "Doing what you forced yourself to do could have ruined both your career and your mental stability.

But it doesn't matter, you don't have to feel guilty about a thing. Everything's all right."

Conway wished dully that he had opened his face-plate and ended it all before those Engineers had swarmed into the gravity grid control room and carried Williamson and himself off to O'Mara. O'Mara must be mad. He, Conway, had violated the prime ethic of his profession and killed an intelligent being. Everything most definitely was not all right.

"Listen to me," O'Mara said seriously. "The Communications boys managed to get a picture of the crashed ship's control room, with the occupant in it, before it hit. The occupant was not your AACL, understand? It was an AMSO, one of the bigger life-forms who are in the habit of keeping a non-intelligent AACL-type creature as pets. Also, there are no AACL's

listed in the hospital, so the beastie you killed was simply the equivalent of a fear-maddened dog in a protective suit." O'Mara shook Conway's shoulders until his head wobbled. "Now do you feel better?"

Conway felt himself coming alive again. He nodded wordlessly.

"You can go," said O'Mara, smiling, "and catch up on your sleep. As for the reorientation talk, I'm afraid I haven't the time to spare. Remind me about it sometime, if you still think you need it..."

Chapter Eleven

During the fourteen hours in which Conway slept, the intake of wounded dropped to a manageable trickle, and news came that the war was over. Monitor engineers and maintenance-men succeeded in clearing the wreckage and repairing the damaged outer hull. With pressure restored, the internal repair work proceeded rapidly, so that when Conway awoke and went in search of Dr. Mannon he found patients being moved into a section which only hours ago had been a dark, airless tangle of wreckage.

He tracked his superior down in a side ward off the main FGLI Casualty section. Mannon was working over a badly burned DBLF whose caterpillar-like body was dwarfed by a table which was designed to take the more massive Tralthan FGLIs. Two other DBLFs, under sedation, showed as white mounds on a similarly outsize bed against the wall, and another lay twitching slightly on a stretcher-carrier near the door.

"Where the blazes have you been?" Mannon said in a voice too tired to be angry. Before Conway could reply he went on impatiently, "Oh, don't tell me. Everybody is grabbing everybody else's staff, and junior interns have to do as they're told..."

Conway felt his face going red. Suddenly he was ashamed of that fourteen hours sleep, but was too much of a coward to

correct Mannon's wrong assumption. Instead he said, "Can I help, sir?"

"Yes," said Mannon, waving towards his patients. "But these are going to be tricky. Punctured and incised wounds, deep. Metallic fragments still within the body, abdominal damage and severe internal haemorrhage. You won't be able to do much without a tape. Go get it. And come straight back, mind!"

A few minutes later he was in O'Mara's office absorbing the DBLF physiology tape. This time he didn't flinch from the Major's hands. While the head-band was being removed he asked, "How is Corpsman Williamson?"

"He'll live," said O'Mara drily. "The bones were set by a Diagnostician. Williamson won't dare die...."

Conway rejoined Mannon as quickly as possible. He was experiencing the characteristic mental double-vision and had to resist the urge to crawl on his stomach, so he knew that the DBLF tape was taking. The caterpillar-like inhabitants of Kelgia were very close to Earth-humans both in basic metabolism and temperament, so there was less of the confusion he had encountered with the earlier Telfi tape. But it gave him an affinity for the beings he was treating which was actually painful.

The concept of gun, bullet and target was a very simple one — just point, pull the trigger, and the target is dead or disabled. The bullet didn't think at all, the pointer didn't think enough, and the target... suffered.

Conway had seen too many disabled targets recently, and lumps of metal which had ploughed their way into them leaving red craters of torn flesh, bone splinters and ruptured blood vessels. In addition there was the long, painful process of recovery. Anyone who would inflict such damage on a thinking, feeling entity deserved something much more painful than the Monitor corrective psychiatry.

A few days previously Conway would have been ashamed of such thoughts – and he was now, a little. He wondered if recent events had initiated in him a process of moral degeneration, or was it that he was merely beginning to grow up?

Five hours later they were through. Mannon gave his nurse instructions to keep the four patients under observation, but told her to get something to eat first.

She was back within minutes carrying a large pack of sandwiches and bearing the news that their dining hall had been taken over by Tralthan Male Medical. Shortly after that Dr. Mannon went to sleep in the middle of his second sandwich. Conway loaded him onto the stretcher-carrier and took him to his room. On the way out he was collared by a Tralthan Diagnostician who ordered him to a DBDG casualty section.

This time Conway found himself working on targets of his own species and his maturing, or moral degeneration, increased. He had begun to think that the Monitor Corps was too damned soft with some people.

Three weeks later Sector General was back to normal. All but the most seriously wounded patients had been transferred to

their local planetary hospitals. The damage caused by the colliding spaceship had been repaired, Tralthan Male Medical had vacated the dining hall, and Conway no longer had to snatch his meals off assorted instrument trolleys. But if things were back to normal for the hospital as a whole, such was not the case with Conway personally.

He was taken off ward duty completely and transferred to a mixed group of Earth-humans and E-Ts – most of whom were senior to himself – taking a course of lectures in Ship Rescue. Some of the difficulties experienced in fishing survivors out of wrecked ships, especially those which contained still-functioning power sources, made Conway open his eyes. The course ended with an interesting, if back-breaking, practical which he managed to pass, and was followed by a more cerebral course in E-T comparative philosophy.

Running at the same time was a series on contamination emergencies: what to do if the methane section sprung a leak and the temperature threatened to rise above minus one-forty, what to do if a chlorine-breather was exposed to oxygen, or a water-breather was strangling in air, or vice-versa. Conway had shuddered at the idea of some of his fellow students trying to give him artificial respiration – some of whom weighed half a ton! – but luckily there was no practical at the end of that course.

Every one of the lecturers stressed the importance of rapid and accurate classification of incoming patients, who very often were in no condition to give this information themselves. In the four-letter classification system the first letter was a guide to the general metabolism, the second to the number and distribution of

limbs and sense organs, and the rest to a combination of pressure and gravity requirements, which also gave an indication of the physical mass and form of protective tegument a being possessed. A, B and C first letters were water breathers. D through F warm-blooded oxygen-breathers, into which classification most of the intelligent races fell. G to K were also oxygen-breathing, but insectile, light-gravity beings. L and M were also light-gravity, but bird-like. The chlorine-breathers were contained in the O and P classifications. After that came the weirdies — radiation-eaters, frigid-blooded or crystalline beings, entities capable of changing physical shape at will, and those possessing various forms of extra-sensory powers. Telepathic species such as the Telfi were given the prefix V. The lecturers would flash a three-second picture of an E-T foot or a section of tegument onto the screen, and if Conway could not rattle off

an accurate classification from this glimpse, sarcastic words would be said.

It was all very interesting stuff, but Conway began to worry a little when he realised that six weeks had passed without him even seeing a patient. He decided to call O'Mara and ask what for – in a respectful, roundabout way, of course.

"Naturally you want back to the wards," O'Mara said, when Conway finally arrived at the point. "Dr. Mannon would like you back, too. But I may have a job for you and don't want you tied up anywhere else. But don't feel that you are simply marking time. You are learning some useful stuff, Doctor. At least, I hope you are. Off."

As Conway replaced the intercom mike he was thinking that a lot of the things he was learning had regard to Major O'Mara

himself. There wasn't a course of lectures on the Chief Psychologist, but there might well have been, because every lecture had O'Mara creeping into it somewhere. And he was only beginning to realise how close he had come to being kicked out of the hospital for his behaviour during the Telfi episode.

O'Mara bore the rank of Major in the Monitor Corps, but Conway had learned that within the hospital it was difficult to draw a limiting line to his authority. As Chief Psychologist he was responsible for the mental health of all the widely varied individuals and species on the Staff, and the avoidance of friction between them.

Given even the highest qualities of tolerance and mutual respect in its personnel, there were still occasions when friction occurred. Potentially dangerous

situations arose through ignorance or misunderstanding, or a being could develop a xenophobic neurosis which might affect its efficiency, or mental stability, or both. An Earth-human doctor, for instance, who had a subconscious fear of spiders would not be able to bring to bear on an Illensan patient the proper degree of clinical detachment necessary for its treatment. So it was O'Mara's job to detect and eradicate such signs of trouble — or if all else failed — remove the potentially dangerous individual before such friction became open conflict. This guarding against wrong, unhealthy or intolerant thinking was a duty which he performed with such zeal that Conway had heard him likened to a latter-day Torquemada.

E-Ts on the staff whose home-planet histories did not contain an equivalent of

the Inquisition likened him to other things, and often called him them to his face. But in O'Mara's book Justifiable Invective was not indicative of wrong thinking, so there were no serious repercussions.

O'Mara was *not* responsible for the psychological short-comings of patients in the hospital, but because it was so often impossible to tell when a purely physical pain left off and a psychosomatic one began, he was consulted in these cases also.

The fact that the Major had detached him from ward duty could mean either promotion or demotion. If Mannon wanted him back, however, then the job which O'Mara had in mind for him must be of greater importance. So Conway was pretty certain that he was not in any trouble with O'Mara, which was a very nice way to feel.

But curiosity was killing him.

Then next morning he received orders to present himself at the office of the Chief Psychologist...

Part Three

Trouble With Emily

IT MUST HAVE been one of the big colonial transports of the type which had carried four generations of colonists between the stars before the hyperdrive made such gargantuan ships obsolete, Conway thought, as he stared at the great tear-drop shape framed in the direct vision port beside O'Mara's desk. With the exception of the pilot's greenhouse, its banks of observation galleries and viewports were blocked off by thick metal plating, and braced solidly from the outside to withstand considerable internal pressure. Even beside the tremendous bulk of Sector General it looked huge.

"You are to act as liaison between the hospital here and the doctor and patient from that ship," said Chief Psychologist

O'Mara, watching him closely. "The doctor is quite a small life-form. The patient is a dinosaur."

Conway tried to keep the astonishment he felt from showing in his face. O'Mara was analysing his reactions, he knew, and perversely he wanted to make the other's job as difficult as possible. He said simply, "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing," said O'Mara.

"It must be psychological, then...?"

O'Mara shook his head.

"Then what is a healthy, sane and intelligent being doing in a hos – "

"It isn't intelligent."

Conway breathed slowly in and out. O'Mara was obviously playing guessing games with him again – not that Conway minded that, provided he was given a sporting chance to guess the right answers. He looked again at the great mass of the converted transport, and meditated.

Putting hyperdrive engines into that great sow of a ship had cost money, and the extensive structural alterations to the hull a great deal more. It seemed an awful lot of trouble to go to for a...

"I've got it!" said Conway, grinning. "It's a new specimen for us to take apart and investigate..."

"Good Lord, no!" cried O'Mara, horrified.

He shot a quick almost frightened look at a small sphere of plastic which was half hidden by some books on his desk, then went on seriously, "This whole business has been arranged at the highest level – a sub-assembly of the Galactic Council, no less. As to what exactly it is all about neither I nor anyone else in Sector General knows. Possibly the doctor who accompanied the patient and who has charge of it may tell you sometime..."

O'Mara's tone at that point implied that he very much doubted it. "...However, all that the hospital and yourself are required to do is co-operate."

Apparently the being who was the doctor in the case came from a race which had been only recently discovered, O'Mara went on to explain, which had tentatively been given the classification VUXG: that was,

they were a life-form possessing certain psi faculties, had the ability to convert practically any substance into energy for their physical needs and could adapt to virtually any environment. They were small and well-nigh indestructible.

The VUXG doctor was telepathic, but ethics and the privacy taboo forbade it using this faculty to communicate with a non-telepathic life-form, even if its range included the Earth-human frequency. For that reason the Translator would be used exclusively. This doctor belonged to a species long-lived both as individuals and in recorded history, and in all that vast sweep of time there had been no war.

They were an old, wise and humble race, O'Mara concluded; intensely humble. So much so that they tended to look down on other races who were not so humble as

they. Conway would have to be very tactful because this extreme, this almost overbearing humility might easily be mistaken for something else.

Conway looked closely at O'Mara. Was there not a faintly sardonic gleam in those keen, iron-grey eyes and a too carefully neutral expression on that square-chiselled competent face? Then with a feeling of complete bafflement he saw O'Mara wink.

Ignoring it, Conway said, "This race, they sound stuck up to me."

He saw O'Mara's lips twitch, then a new voice broke in on the proceedings with dramatic suddenness. It was a flat, toneless, Translated voice which boomed, "The sense of the preceding remark is not clear to me. We are stuck — adhering — up

where?" There was a short pause, then, "While I admit that my own mental capabilities are very low, at the same time I would suggest in all humility that the fault may not altogether lie with me, but be due in part to the lamentable tendency for you younger and more impractical races to make sense-free noises when there is no necessity for a noise to be made at all."

It was then that Conway's wildly searching eyes lit on the transparent plastic globe on O'Mara's desk. Now that he was really looking at it he could see several lengths of strapping attached to it, together with the unmistakable shape of a Translator pack. Inside the container there floated a *something*... "Dr. Conway," said O'Mara drily, "meet Dr. Arretapec, your new boss." Mouthing silently, he added, "You and your big mouth!"

The thing in the plastic globe, which resembled nothing so much as a withered prune floating in a spherical gob of syrup, was the VUXG doctor! Conway felt his face burning. It was a good thing that the Translator dealt only with words and did not also transfer their emotional – in this instance sarcastic – connotations, otherwise he would have been in a most embarrassing position.

"As the closest co-operation is required," O'Mara went on quickly, "and the mass of the being Arretapec is slight, you will *wear* it while on duty." O'Mara deftly suited actions to his words and strapped the container onto Conway's shoulder. When he had finished he added, "You can go, Dr. Conway. Detailed orders, when and where necessary, will be given to you direct by Dr. Arretapec."

It could only happen here, Conway thought wryly as they left. Here he was with an E-T doctor riding on his shoulder like a quivering, transparent dumpling, their patient a healthy and husky dinosaur, and the purpose of the whole business was something which his colleague was reluctant to clarify. Conway had heard of blind obedience, but blind co-operation was a new – and he thought, rather stupid – concept.

On the way to Lock Seventeen, the point where the hospital was joined to the ship containing their patient, Conway tried to explain the organisation of Sector Twelve General Hospital to the extra-terrestrial doctor.

Dr. Arretapec asked some pertinent questions from time to time, so presumably he was interested.

Even though he had been expecting it, the sheer size of the converted transport's interior shocked Conway. With the exception of the two levels nearest the ship's outer skin, which at the moment housed the artificial gravity generators, the Monitor Corps engineer had cut away everything to leave a great sphere of emptiness some two thousand feet in diameter. The inner surface of this sphere was a wet and muddy shambles. Great untidy heaps of uprooted vegetation were piled indiscriminately about, most of it partially trampled into the mud. Conway also noticed that quite a lot of it was withered and dying.

After the gleaming, aseptic cleanliness which he was used to Conway found that the sight was doing peculiar things to his nervous system. He began looking around

for the patient.

His gaze moved out and upwards across the acres of mud and tumbled vegetation until, high above his head on the opposite side of the sphere the swamp merged into a small, deep lake. There were shadowy movements and swirlings below its surface. Suddenly a tiny head mounted on a great sinuous neck broke the surface, looked around, then submerged again with a tremendous splash.

Conway surveyed the distance to the lake and the quality of the terrain between it and himself. He said, "It's a long way to walk, I'll get an anti-gravity belt..."

"That will not be necessary," said Arretapec. The ground abruptly flung itself away from them and they were hurtling

towards the distant lake.

Classification VUXG, Conway reminded himself when he got his breath back; possessing certain psi faculties...

Chapter Two

They landed gently near the edge of the lake. Arretapec told Conway that it wanted to concentrate its thinking processes for a few minutes and requested him to keep both quiet and still. A few seconds later an itching started deep inside his ear somewhere. Conway manfully refrained from poking at it with his finger and instead kept all his attention on the surface of the lake.

Suddenly a great grey-brown, mountainous body broke the surface, a long, tapering

neck and tail slapping the water with explosive violence. For an instant Conway thought that the great beast had simply bobbed to the surface like a rubber ball but then he told himself that the bed of the lake must have shelved suddenly under the monster, giving an optically similar effect. Still threshing madly with neck, tail and four massive columnar legs the giant reptile gained the lake's edge and floundered onto, or rather *into*, the mud, because it sank over its knee joints. Conway estimated that the said knee-joints were at least ten feet from ground level, that the thickest diameter of the great body was about eighteen feet and that from head to tail the brute measured well over one hundred feet. He guessed its weight at about 80,000 pounds. It possessed no natural body armour but the extreme end of its tail, which showed surprising mobility for such a heavy member, had an osseous bulge from which spouted two wicked,

forward-curving bony spikes.

As Conway watched, the great reptile continued to churn up the mud in obvious agitation. Then abruptly it fell onto its knees and its great neck curved around and inwards until its head muzzled underneath its own underbelly. It was a ridiculous but oddly pathetic posture.

"It is badly frightened," said Arretapec. "These conditions do not adequately stimulate its true environment."

Conway could understand and sympathise with the beast. The ingredients of its environment were no doubt accurately reproduced but rather than being arranged in a life-like manner they had just been thrown together into a large, muddy stew. Probably not deliberately, he thought, there must have been some trouble with the

artificial gravity grids on the way out to account for this jumbled landscape. He said; "Is the mental state of the patient of importance to the purpose of your work?"

"Very much so," said Arretapec.

"Then the first step is to make it a little more happy with its lot," said Conway, and went down on his haunches. He took a sample of the lake water, the mud and several of the varieties of vegetation nearby. Finally he straightened up and said, "Is there anything else we have to do here?"

"I can do nothing at present," Arretapec replied. The Translated voice was toneless and utterly without emotion, naturally, but from the spacing of the words Conway thought that the other sounded deeply disappointed.

Back at the entry lock Conway made determined tracks towards the dining hall reserved for warm-blooded, oxygen-breathing life-forms. He was hungry.

Many of his colleagues were in the hall – DBLF caterpillars who were slow everywhere but in the operating theatre, Earth-human DBDG's like himself and the great, elephantine Tralthan – classification FGLI – who, with the little OTSB life-form who lived in symbiosis with it, was well on the way to joining the ranks of the lordly Diagnosticians. But instead of engaging in conversation all round, Conway concentrated on gaining all the data possible on the planet of origin of the reptilian patient.

For greater ease of conversation he had taken Arretapec out of its plastic container

and placed it on the table in a space between the potatoes and gravy dish. At the end of the meal Conway was startled to find that the being had dissolved — ingested — a two inch hole in the table!

"When in deep cogitation," Arretapec replied when Conway rather exasperatedly wanted to know why, "the process of food-gathering and ingestion is automatic and unconscious with us. We do not indulge in eating as a pleasure as you obviously do, it dilutes the quality of our thinking. However, if I have caused damage...?"

Conway hastily reassured him that a plastic tablecloth was relatively valueless in the present circumstances, and beat a quick retreat from the place. He did not try to explain how catering officers could feel rather peeved over their relatively valueless property.

After lunch Conway picked up the analysis of his test samples, then headed for the Maintenance Chief's office. This was occupied by one of the Nidian teddy-bears wearing an arm-band with gold edging, and an Earth-human in Monitor green whose collar bore a Colonel's insignia over an Engineering flash. Conway described the situation and what he wanted done, if such a thing was possible.

"It is possible," said the red teddy bear after they had gone into a huddle over Conway's data sheets, "but – "

"O'Mara told me expense is no object," Conway interrupted, nodding towards the tiny being on his shoulder. "Maximum co-operation' he said."

"In that case we can do it," the Monitor

Colonel put in briskly,. He was regarding Arretapec with an expression close to awe. "Let's see, transports to bring the stuff from its home planet – quicker and cheaper in the long run than synthesising its food here. And we'll need two full companies of the Engineer's Division with their robots to make its house a happy home, instead of the twenty-odd men responsible for bringing it here." His eyes became unfocused as rapid calculations went on behind them, then: "Three days."

Even allowing for the fact that hyperdrive travel was instantaneous, Conway thought that that was very fast indeed. He said so.

The Colonel acknowledged the compliment with the thinnest of smiles. He said, "What is all this in aid of, you haven't told us yet?"

Conway waited for a full minute to give

Arretapec plenty of time to answer the question, but the VUXG kept silent. He could only mumble "I don't know" and leave quickly.

The next door they entered was boldly labelled "Dietician-in-Chief – Species DBDG, DBLF and FGFI. Dr. K. W. HARDIN." Inside, the white-haired and distinguished head of Dr. Hardin raised itself from some charts he was studying and bawled, "And what's biting *you*...?" While Conway was impressed by and greatly respected Dr. Hardin, he was no longer afraid of him. The Chief Dietician was a man who was quite charming to strangers, Conway had learned; with acquaintances he tended to be a little on the abrupt side, and towards his friends he was downright rude. As briefly as possible Conway tried to explain what was biting him.

"You mean I have to go around replanting the stuff it's eaten, so that it doesn't know but that it grew naturally?" Hardin interrupted at one point. "Who the blazes do you think I am? And how much does this dirty great cow eat, anyway?"

Conway gave him the figures he had worked out.

"Three and a half *tons* of palm fronds a day!" Hardin roared, practically climbing his desk. "And tender green shoots of... Ye Gods! And they tell me dietetics is an exact science. Three-and-a-half tons of shrubbery, exact! *Hah....!*"

They left Hardin at that point. Conway knew that everything would be all right because the dietitian had shown no signs of becoming charming.

To the VUXG Conway explained that Hardin had not been non-co-operative, but had just sounded that way. He was keen to help as had been the other two. Arretapec replied to the effect that members of such immature. and short-lived races could not help behaving in an insane fashion.

A second visit to their patient followed. Conway brought a G-belt along with him this time and so was independent of Arretapec's teleportive ability. They drifted around and above the great, ambulating mountain of flesh and bone, but not once did Arretapec so much as touch the creature. Nothing whatever happened except that the patient once again showed signs of agitation and Conway suffered a periodic itch deep inside his ear. He sneaked a quick look at the tell-tale which was surgically embedded in his fore-arm to

see if there was anything foreign in his bloodstream, but everything was normal. Maybe he was just allergic to dinosaurs.

Back in the hospital proper Conway found that the frequency and violence of his yawns was threatening to dislocate his jaw, and he realised that he had had a hard day. The concept of sleep was completely strange to Arretapec, but the being raised no objections to Conway indulging in it if it was necessary to his physical well-being. Conway gravely assured it that it was, and headed for his room by the shortest route.

What to do with Dr. Arretapec bothered him for a while. The VUXG was an important personage; he could not very well leave it in a storage closet or in a corner somewhere, even though the being was tough enough to be comfortable in much more rugged surroundings. Nor could he

simply put it out for the night without gravely hurting its feelings – at least, if the positions had been reversed *his* feelings would have been hurt. He wished O'Mara had given instructions to cover this contingency. Finally he placed the being on top of his writing desk and forgot about it.

Arretapec must have thought deeply during the night, because there was a three inch hole in the desktop next morning.

Chapter Three

During the afternoon of the second day a row started between the two doctors. At least Conway considered it a row; what an entirely alien mind like Arretapec's chose to think of it was anybody's guess.

It started when the VUXG requested Conway to be quiet and still while it went into one of its silences. The being had gone back to the old position on Conway's shoulder, explaining that it could concentrate more effectively while at rest rather than with part of its mind engaged in

levitating. Conway had done as he was told without comment though there were several things he would have liked to say: What was wrong with the patient? What was Arretapec doing about it? And *how* was it being done when neither of them so much as touched the creature? Conway was in the intensely frustrating position of a doctor confronted with a patient on whom he is not allowed to practise his craft: he was eaten up with curiosity and it was bothering him. Yet he did his best to stand still.

But the itching started inside his ear again, worse than ever before. He barely noticed the geysers of mud and water flung up by the dinosaur as it threshed its way out of the shallows and onto the bank. The gnawing, unlocalised itch built up remorselessly until with a sudden yell of fright he slapped at the side of his head

and began poking frantically at his ear. The action brought immediate and blessed relief, but....

"I cannot work if you fidget," said Arretapec, the rapidity of the words the only indication of their emotional content. "You will therefore leave me at once."

"I wasn't fidgeting," Conway protested angrily. "My ear itched and I –"

"An itch, especially one capable of making you move as this one has done, is a symptom of a physical disorder which should be treated," the VUXG interrupted. "Or it is caused by a parasitic or symbiotic life-form dwelling, perhaps unknown to you, on your body."

Now, I expressly stated that my assistant should be in perfect physical health and not a member of a species who either

consciously or unconsciously harboured parasites – a type, you must understand, which are particularly prone to fidget – so that you can understand my displeasure. Had it not been for your sudden movement I might have accomplished something, therefore go."

"Why you supercilious – "

The dinosaur chose that moment to stagger into the shallow water again, lose its footing and come the great granddaddy of all belly-flops. Falling mud and spray drenched Conway and a small tidal wave surged over his feet. The distraction was enough to make him pause, and the pause gave him time to realise that he had not been personally insulted. There were many intelligent species who harboured parasites – some of them actually necessary to the health of the host body, so that in their

case the slang expression being lousy also meant being in tiptop condition. Maybe Arretapec had meant to be insulting, but he could not be sure. And the VUXG was, after all, a very important person...

"What exactly might you have accomplished?" Conway asked sarcastically. He was still angry, but had decided to fight on the professional rather than the personal level. Besides, he knew that the Translator would take the insulting edge off his words. "What are you *trying* to accomplish, and how do you expect to do it merely by – from what I can see, anyway – just looking at the patient?"

"I cannot tell you," Arretapec replied after a few seconds. "My purpose is... is vast. It is for the future. You would not understand."

"How do you know? If you told me what you were doing maybe I could help."

"You cannot help."

"Look," said Conway, exasperated, "you haven't even tried to use the full facilities of the hospital yet. No matter what you are trying to do for your patient, the first step should have been a thorough examination – immobilisation, followed by X-rays, biopsys, the lot. This would have given you valuable physiological data upon which to work – "

"To state the matter simply," Arretapec broke in, "you are saying that in order to understand a complicated organism or mechanism, one must first be broken down into its component parts that they might be understood individually. My race does not believe that an object must be destroyed –

even in part – before it can be understood. Your crude methods of investigation are therefore worthless to me. I suggest that you leave."

Seething, Conway left.

His first impulse was to storm into O'Mara's office and tell the Chief Psychologist to find somebody else to run errands for the VUXG. But O'Mara had told him that his present assignment was important, and O'Mara would have unkind things to say if he thought that Conway was throwing his hand in simply out of pique because his curiosity had not been satisfied or his pride hurt. There were lots of doctors – the assistants to Diagnosticians, particularly – who were not allowed to touch their superior's patients, or was it just that Conway resented a being like Arretapec being his superior...?

If Conway went to O'Mara in his present frame of mind there was real danger of the psychologist deciding that he was temperamentally unsuited for his position. Quite apart from the prestige attached to a post at Sector General, the work performed in it was both stimulating and very much worthwhile. Should O'Mara decide that he was unfit to remain here and pack him off to some planetary hospital, it would be the greatest tragedy of Conway's life.

But if he could not go to O'Mara, where could he go? Ordered off one job and not having another, Conway was at loose ends. He stood at a corridor intersection for several minutes thinking, while beings representing a cross-section of all the intelligent races of the galaxy strode, undulated or skittered past him, then suddenly he had it. There was something

he could do, something which he would have done anyway if everything had not happened with such a rush.

The hospital library had several items on the pre-historic period of Earth, both taped and in the old-fashioned and more cumbersome book form. Conway heaped them on a reading desk and prepared to make an attempt to satisfy his professional curiosity about the patient in this roundabout fashion.

The time passed very quickly.

Dinosaur, Conway discovered at once, was simply a general term applied to the giant reptiles. The patient, except for its larger size and bony enlargement of the tip of the tail, was identical in outward physical characteristics to the Brontosaurus which

lived among the swamps of the Jurassic Period. It also was herbivorous, but unlike their patient had no means of defence against the carnivorous reptiles of its time. There was a surprising amount of physiological data available as well, which Conway absorbed greedily.

The spinal column was composed of huge vertebrae, and with the exception of the caudal vertebrae all were hollow – this saving of osseous material making possible a relatively low body weight in comparison with its tremendous size. It was oviparous. The head was small, the brain case one of the smallest found among the vertebrates. But in addition to this brain there was a well-developed nerve centre in the region of the sacral vertebrae which was several times as large as the brain proper. It was thought that the brontosaur grew slowly, their great size

being explained by the fact that they could live two hundred or more years.

Their only defence against contemporary rivals was to take to and remain in the water — they could pasture under water and required only brief mouthfuls of air, apparently. They became extinct when geologic changes caused their swampy habitats to dry up and leave them at the mercy of their natural enemies.

One authority stated that these saurians were nature's biggest failure. Yet they had flourished, said another, through three geologic periods — the Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous — which totalled 140 million years, a long time indeed for a 'failure' to be around, considering the fact that Man had existed only for approximately half a million years...! I Conway left the library with the conviction

that he had discovered something important, but what exactly it was he could not say; it was an intensely frustrated feeling. Over a hurried meal he decided that he badly needed more information and there was only one person who might be able to give it to him. He would see O'Mara again.

"Where is our small friend?" said the psychologist sharply when Conway entered his office a few minutes later. "Have you had a fight or something?"

Conway gulped and tried to keep his voice steady as he replied, "Dr. Arretapec wished to work with the patient alone for a while, and I've been doing some research on dinosaurs in the library. I wondered if you had any more information for me?"

"A little," O'Mara said. He looked steadily

at Conway for several very uncomfortable seconds, then grunted, "Here it is..."

The Monitor Corps survey vessel which had discovered Arretapec's home planet had, after realising the high stage of civilisation reached by the inhabitants, given them the hyper-drive. One of the first planets visited had been a raw, young world devoid of intelligent life, but one of its life-forms had interested them – the giant saurian. They had told the Galactic powers-that-be that given the proper assistance they might be able to do something which would benefit civilisation as a whole, and as it was impossible for any telepathic race to tell a lie or even understand what a lie is, they were given the assistance asked for and Arretapec and his patient had come to Sector General.

There was one other small item as well, O'Mara told Conway. Apparently the VUXG's psi faculties included a sort of precognitive ability. This latter did not appear to be of much use because it did not work with individuals but only with populations, and then so far in the future and in such a haphazard manner that it was practically useless.

Conway left O'Mara feeling more confused than ever.

He was still trying to make the odd bits and pieces of information add up to something which made sense, but either he was too tired or too stupid. And definitely he was tired; these past two days his brain had been just so much thick, weary fog...

There must be an association between the

two factors, Arretapec's coming and this unaccountable weariness, Conway thought: he was in good physical condition and no amount of muscular or mental exertion had left him feeling this way before. And had not Arretapec said something about the itching sensations he had felt being symptomatic of a disorder?

All of a sudden his job with the VUXG doctor was no longer merely frustrating or annoying, Conway was beginning to feel anxiety for his own personal safety. Suppose the itching was due to some new type of bacteria which did not show up on his personal tell-tale? He had thought something like this when his fidgeting had caused Arretapec to send him away, but for the rest of the day he had been subconsciously trying to convince himself that it was nothing because the intensity of the sensations had diminished to

practically zero. Now he knew that he should have had one of the senior physicians look into it. He should, in fact, do it now.

But Conway was very tired. He promised himself that he would get Dr. Mannon, his previous superior, to give him a going over in the morning. And in the morning he would have to get on the right side of Arretapec again. He was still worrying about the strange new disease he might have caught and the correct method of apologising to a VUXG life-form when he fell asleep.

Chapter Four

Next morning there was another two-inch hollow eaten in the top of his desk and Arretapec was nestling inside it. As soon as Conway demonstrated that he was awake by sitting up, the being spoke: "It had occurred to me since yesterday," the VUXG said, "that I have perhaps been expecting too much in the way of self-control, emotional stability, and the ability to endure or to discount minor physical irritants in a member of a species which is — relatively, you understand — of low mentality. I will therefore do my utmost to bear these points in mind during our future

relations together."

It took a few seconds for Conway to realise that Arretapec had apologised to him. When he did he thought that it was the most insulting apology he had ever had tendered to him, and that it spoke well for his self-control that he did not tell the other so. Instead he smiled and insisted that it was all his fault. They left to see their patient again.

The interior of the converted transport had changed out of all recognition. Instead of a hollow sphere covered with a muddy shambles of soil, water and foliage, three-quarters of the available surface was now a perfect representation of a Mesozoic landscape. Yet it was not exactly the same as the pictures Conway had studied yesterday, because they had been of a distant age of Earth and this flora had been

transplanted from the patient's own world, but the differences were surprisingly small. The greatest change was in the sky.

Where previously it had been possible to look up at the opposite side of the hollow sphere, now one looked up into a blue-white mist in which burned a very lifelike sun. The hollow centre of the ship had been almost filled with this semi-opaque gas so that now it would take a keen eye and a mind armed with foreknowledge for a person to know that he was not standing on a real planet with a real sun in the foggy sky above him. The engineers had done a fine job.

"I had not thought such an elaborate and life-like reconstruction possible here," said Arretapec suddenly. "You are to be commended. This should have a very good affect on the patient."

The life-form under discussion – for some peculiar reason the engineers insisted on calling it Emily – was contentedly shredding the fronds from the top of a thirty foot high palm-like growth. The fact of its being on dry land instead of pasturing under water was indicative of its state of mind, Conway knew, because the old-time brontosaur invariably took to the water when threatened by enemies, that being its only defence. Apparently this neo-brontosaurus hadn't a care in the world.

"Essentially it is the same as fitting up a new ward for the treatment of any extra-terrestrial patient," said Conway modestly, "the chief difference here being in the scale of the work undertaken."

"I am nevertheless impressed," said Arretapec.

First apologies and now compliments, Conway thought wryly. As they moved closer and Arretapec once again warned him to keep quiet and still, Conway guessed that the VUXG's change of manner was due to the work of the engineers. With the patient now in ideal surroundings the treatment, whatever form it was taking, might have an increased chance of success...

Suddenly Conway began to itch again. It started in the usual place deep inside his right ear, but this time it spread and built up in intensity until his whole brain seemed to be crawling with viciously biting insects. He felt cold sweat break on him, and remembered his fears of the previous evening when he had resolved to go to Mannon. This wasn't imagination, this was serious, perhaps deadly serious. His hands

flew to his head with a panicky, involuntary motion, knocking the container holding Arretapec to the ground.

"You are fidgeting again..." began the VUXG.

"I... I'm sorry," Conway stammered. He mumbled something incoherent about having to leave, that it was important and couldn't wait, then fled in disorder.

Three hours later he was sitting in Dr. Mannon's DBDG examination room while Mannon's dog alternately growled fiercely at him or rolled on its back and looked appealing in vain attempts to entice him to play with it. But Conway had no inclination for the ritual pummelling and wrestling that the dog and himself enjoyed when he had the time for it. All his attention was focussed on the bent head of his former

superior and on the charts lying on Mannon's desk. Suddenly the other looked up.

"There's nothing wrong with you," he said in the peremptory manner reserved for students and patients suspected of malingering. A few seconds later he added, "Oh, I've no doubt you've felt these sensations – tiredness, itching, and so on – but all the indications are that it is psychosomatic. Tell me, what sort of case are you working on at the moment?"

Conway told him. A few times during the narration Mannon grinned.

"I take it this is your first long-term – er – exposure to a telepathic life-form and that I am the first you've mentioned this trouble to?" Mannon's tone was of one making a statement rather than of asking a question.

"And, of course, although you feel this itching sensation intensely when close to the VUXG and the patient, it continues in a weaker form at other times."

Conway nodded. "I felt it for a while just five minutes ago."

"Naturally, there is attenuation with distance," Mannon said. "But as regards yourself, you have nothing to worry about. Arretapec is — all unknowingly, you understand — simply trying to make a telepath out of you. I'll explain..."

Apparently prolonged contact with some telepathic life-forms stimulated a certain area in the human brain which was either the beginnings of a telepathic function that would evolve in the future, or the atrophied remnant of something possessed in the primitive past and since lost.

The result was troublesome but a quite harmless irritation. On very rare occasions however, Mannon added, this proximity produced in the human a sort of artificial telepathic faculty — that was, he could sometimes receive thoughts from the telepath to whom he had been exposed, but of no other being. The faculty was in all cases strictly temporary, and disappeared when the being responsible for bringing it about left the human.

"But these cases of induced telepathy are extremely rare," Mannon concluded, "and obviously you are getting only the irritant by-product, otherwise you might know what Arretapec is playing at simply by reading his mind..."

While Dr. Mannon had been talking, and relieved of the worry that he had caught

some strange new disease, Conway's mind had been working furiously. Vaguely, as odd events with Arretapec and the brontosaurus returned to his mind and were added to scraps of the VUXG's conversations and his own studying of the life – and extinction – of Earth's long-gone race of giant reptiles, a picture was forming in his mind. It was a crazy – or a least cock-eyed – picture, and it was still incomplete, but what else *could* a being like Arretapec be doing to a patient like the brontosaurus, a patient who had nothing at all wrong with it?

"Pardon?" Conway said. He had become aware that Mannon had said something which he had not caught.

"I said if you find out what Arretapec is doing, let me know," Mannon repeated.

"Oh, I know what it's doing," said Conway. "At least I think I do – and I understand why Arretapec does not want to talk about it. The ridicule if it tried and failed, why even the idea of its trying is ridiculous. What I don't know is *why* it is doing it..."

"Dr. Conway," said Mannon in a deceptively mild voice, "if you don't tell me what you're talking about I will, as our cruder-minded interns so succinctly put it, have your guts for garters."

Conway stood up quickly. He had to get back to Arretapec without further delay. Now that he had a rough idea of what was going on there were things he must see to – urgent safety precautions that a being such as the VUXG might not think of. Absently, he said, "I'm sorry, sir, I can't tell you. You see, from what you've told me

there is a possibility that my knowledge derives directly from Arretapec's mind, telepathically, and is therefore privileged information. I've got to rush now, but thanks very much."

Once outside Conway practically ran to the nearest communicator and called Maintenance. The voice which answered he recognised as belonging to the engineer Colonel he had met earlier. He said quickly, "Is the hull of that converted transport strong enough to take the shock of a body of approximately eight thousand pounds moving at, uh, anything between twenty and one hundred miles an hour, and what safety measures can you take against such an occurrence?"

There was a long, loaded silence, then, "Are you kidding? It would go through the hull like so much plywood. But in the event

of a major puncture like that, the volume of air inside the ship is such that there would be plenty of time for the Maintenance people to get into suits. Why do you ask?"

Conway thought quickly. He wanted a job done but did not want to tell why. He told the Colonel that he was worried about the gravity grids which maintained the artificial gravity inside the ship. There were so many of them that if one section should accidentally reverse its polarity and fling the brontosaurus away from it instead of holding it down...

Rather testily the Colonel agreed that the gravity grids could be switched to repulsion, also focussed into pressor or attractor beams, but that the changeover did not occur simply because somebody breathed on them. There were safety devices incorporated which...

"All the same," Conway broke in, "I would feel much safer about things if you could fix all the gravity grids so that at the approach of a heavy falling body they would automatically switch over to repulsion – just in case the worst happens. Is that possible?"

"Is this an order," said the Colonel, "or are you just the worrying type?"

"It's an order, I'm afraid," said Conway.

"Then it's possible." A sharp click put a full stop to the conversation.

Conway set out to rejoin Arretapec again to become an ideal assistant to his chief in that he would have answers ready before the questions were asked. Also, he thought wryly, he would have to manoeuvre the

VUXG into asking the proper questions so that he could answer them.

Chapter Five

On the fifth day of their association, Conway said to Arretapec, "I have been assured that your patient is not suffering from either a physical condition or one requiring psychiatric correction, so that I am led to the conclusion that you are trying to effect some change in the brain structure by telepathic, or some related means. If my conclusions are correct, I have information which might aid or at least interest you: There was a giant reptile similar to the patient which lived on my own planet in primitive times. From remains unearthed by archaeologists we know that it

possessed, or required, a second nerve centre several times as big as the brain proper in the region of the sacral vertebrae, presumably to handle movements of the hind legs, tail and so on. If such was the case here you might have two brains to deal with instead of one."

As he waited for Arretapec to reply Conway gave thanks that the VUXG belonged to a highly ethical species which did not hold with using their telepathy on non-telepaths, otherwise the being would have known that Conway *knew* that their patient had two nerve-centres — that he knew because while Arretapec had been slowly eating another hole in his desk one night and Conway and the patient had been asleep, a colleague of Conway's had surreptitiously used an X-ray scanner and camera on the unsuspecting dinosaur.

"Your conclusions are correct," said Arretapec at last, "and your information is interesting. I had not thought it possible for one entity to possess two brains. However this would explain the unusual difficulty of communication I have with this creature. I will investigate."

Conway felt the itching start inside his head again, but now that he knew what it was he was able to take it without 'fidgeting.' The itch died away and Arretapec said, "I am getting a response. For the first time I am getting a response." The itching sensation began inside his skull again and slowly built up, and up It wasn't just like ants with red-hot pincers chewing at his brain cells, Conway thought agonisedly as he fought to keep from moving and distracting Arretapec now that the being appeared to be getting somewhere; it felt as though somebody

was punching holes in his poor, quivering brain with a rusty nail. It had never been like this before, this was sheer torture.

Then suddenly there was a subtle change in the sensations. Not a lessening, but of something added. Conway had a brief, blinding glimpse of something – it was like a phrase of great music played on a damaged recording, or the beauty of a masterpiece that is cracked and disfigured almost beyond recognition. He knew that for an instant, through the distorting waves of pain, he had actually seen into Arretapec's mind.

Now he knew *everything*... The VUXG continued to have responses all that day, but they were erratic, violent and uncontrolled. After one particular dramatic response had caused the panicky dinosaur to level a couple of acres of trees, then

sent it charging into the lake in terror, Arretapec called a halt.

"It is useless," said the doctor. "The being will not use what I am trying to teach it for itself, and when I force the process it becomes afraid."

There was no emotion in the flat, Translated tones, but Conway who had had a glimpse of Arretapec's mind knew the bitter disappointment that the other felt. He wished desperately that he could help, but he knew that he could do nothing directly of assistance – Arretapec was the one who had to do the real work in this case, he could only prod things along now and then. He was still wracking his brain for an answer to the problem when he turned in that night, and just before he went to sleep he thought he found it.

Next morning they tracked down Dr. Mannon just as he was entering the DBLF operating theatre. Conway said, "Sir, can we borrow your dog?"

"Business or pleasure?" said Mannon suspiciously. He was very attached to his dog, so much so that non-human members of the staff suspected a symbiotic relationship.

"We won't hurt it at all," said Conway reassuringly.

"Thanks." He took the lead from the appendage of the Tralthan intern holding it, then said to Arretapec, "Now back to my room..."

Ten minutes later the dog, barking furiously, was dashing around Conway's room while Conway himself hurled

cushions and pillows at it. Suddenly one connected fairly, bowling it over. Paws scrabbling and skidding on the plastic flooring it erupted into frantic bursts of high-pitched yelps and snarls.

Conway found himself whipped off his feet and suspended eight feet up in mid-air.

"I did not realise," boomed the voice of Arretapec from his position on the desk, "that you had intended this to be a demonstration of Earth-human sadism. I am shocked, horrified. You will release this unfortunate animal at once."

Conway said, "Put me down and I'll explain..."

On the eighth day they returned the dog to Dr. Mannon and went back to work on the

dinosaur. At the end of the second week they were still working and Arretapec, Conway and their patient were being talked, whistled, cheeped and grunted about in every language in use at the hospital. They were in the dining hall one day when Conway became aware that the annunciator which had been droning out messages in the background was now calling his name.

"...O'Mara on the intercom," it was saying monotonously, "Doctor Conway, please. Would you contact Major O'Mara on the intercom as soon as possible..."

"Excuse me," Conway said to Arretapec, who was nestling on the plastic block which the catering superintendent had rather pointedly placed at Conway's table, and headed for the nearest communicator.

"It isn't a life-and-death matter," said O'Mara when he called and asked what was wrong. "I would like to have some things explained to me. For instance: "Dr. Hardin is practically frothing at the mouth because the food-vegetation which he plants and replenishes so carefully has now got to be sprayed with some chemical which will render it less pleasant to taste, and why is a certain amount of the vegetation kept at its full flavour but in storage? What are you doing with a tri-di projector? And where does Mannon's dog fit into this?" O'Mara paused, reluctantly, for breath, then went on, "And Colonel Skempton says that his engineers are run ragged setting up tractor and pressor beam mounts for you two – not that he minds that so much, but he says that if all that gadgetry was pointed outwards instead of inwards that hulk you're messing around in could take on and lick a Federation cruiser.

"And his men, well..." O'Mara was holding his tone to *a* conversational level, but it was obvious that he was having trouble doing so. "...quite a few of them are having to consult me professionally. Some of them, the lucky ones perhaps, just don't believe their eyes. The others would *much* prefer pink elephants."

There was a short silence, then O'Mara said, "Mannon tells me that you climbed onto your ethical high horse and wouldn't say a thing when he asked you. I was wondering – "

"I'm sorry, sir," said Conway awkwardly.

"But what the blinding blue blazes are you *doing*?" O'Mara erupted, then, "Well, good luck with it anyway. Off."

Conway hurried to rejoin Arretapec and

take up the conversation where it had been left off. As they were leaving *a* little later, Conway said, "It was stupid of me not to take the size factor into consideration. But now that we have — "

"Stupid of us, friend Conway," Arretapec corrected in its toneless voice. "Most of your ideas have worked out successfully so far. You have been of invaluable assistance to me, so much so that I sometimes think that you have guessed my purpose. I am hoping that this idea, also, will work."

"We'll keep our fingers crossed."

On this occasion Arretapec did not, as it usually did, point out that firstly it did not believe in luck and secondly that it possessed no fingers. Arretapec was definitely growing more understanding of

the ways of humans. And Conway now wished that the high-minded VUXG would read his mind, just so that the being would know how much he was with it in this, how much he wanted Arretapec's experiment to succeed this afternoon.

Conway could feel the tension mounting in him all the way to the ship. When he was giving the engineers and maintenance-men their final instructions and making sure that they knew what to do in any emergency, he knew that he was joking a bit too much and laughing a little too-heartily. But then everyone was showing signs of strain. A little later, however, as he stood less than fifty yards from the patient and with equipment festooning like a Christmas tree — an anti-gravity pack belted round his waist, a tri-di projector locus and viewer strapped to his chest and his shoulders hung with a heavy radio pack — his tension

had reached the point of immobility and outward calm of the spring which can be wound no tighter.

"Projector crew ready," said a voice.

"The food's in place," came another.

"All tractor and pressor beam men on top line," reported a third.

"Right, Doctor," Conway said to the hovering Arretapec, and ran a suddenly dry tongue around drier lips. "Do your stuff."

He pressed a stud on the locus mechanism on his chest and immediately there sprang into being around and above him the immaterial image of a Conway who was fifty feet high. He saw the patient's head go up, heard the low-pitched whinnying sound

that it made when agitated or afraid and which contrasted so oddly with its bulk, and saw it backing ponderously towards the water's edge. But Arretapec was radiating furiously at the brontosaur's two small, almost rudimentary, brains — sending out great waves of calm and reassurance — and the great reptile grew quiet. Very slowly, so as not to alarm it, Conway went through the motions of reaching behind him, picking something up and placing it well in front of him. Above and around him his fifty-foot image did the same.

But where the image's great hand came down there was a bundle of greenery, and when the solid-seeming but immaterial hand moved upwards the bundle followed it, kept in position at the apex of three delicately manipulated pressor beams. The fresh, moist bundle of plants and palm fronds was placed close to the still uneasy

dinosaur, apparently by the hand which then withdrew.

After what seemed like an eternity to the waiting Conway the massive, sinuous neck arched downwards. It began poking at the greenery. It began to nibble...

Conway went through the same motions again, and again. All the time he and his fifty-foot image kept edging closer. The brontosaur, he knew, could at a pinch eat the vegetation which grew around it, but since Dr. Hardin's sprayer had gone into operation it wasn't very nice stuff. But it could tell that these titbits were the real, old stuff; the fresh, juicy, sweet-smelling food that it used to know which had so unaccountably disappeared of late. Its nibbles became hungry gobblings.

Conway said, "All right. Stage Two..."

Chapter Six

Using the tiny viewer which showed his image's relationship to the dinosaur as a guide, Conway reached forward again. High up and invisible on the opposite wall of the hull another pressor beam went into operation, synchronising its movements with the hand which was now apparently stroking the patient's great neck, and administering a firm but gentle pressure. After an initial instant of panic the patient went back to eating, and occasionally shuddering a little. Arretapec reported that it was enjoying the sensation.

"Now," said Conway, "we'll start playing rough."

Two great hands were placed against its side and massed pressors toppled it over with a ground-shaking crash. In real terror now it threshed and heaved madly in a vain attempt to get its ponderous and ungainly body upright on its feet. But instead of inflicting mortal damage, the great hands continued only to stroke and pat. The brontosaur had quieted and was showing signs of enjoying itself again when the hands moved to a new position. Tractor and pressor beams both seized the recumbent body, yanked it upright and toppled it onto the opposite side.

Using the anti-gravity belt to increase his mobility, Conway began hopping over and around the brontosaur, with Arretapec, who was in rapport with the patient, reporting

constantly on the effects of the various stimuli. He stroked, patted, pummelled and pushed at the giant reptile with blown-up, immaterial hands and feet. He yanked its tail and he slapped its neck, and all the time the tractor and pressor crews kept perfect time with him...

Something like this had occurred before, not to mention other things which, it was rumoured, had driven one engineer to drink and at least four off it. But it was not until the size factor had been taken into consideration as it had today with this monster tri-di projection that there had been such promising results. Previously it had been as if a mouse were manhandling a St. Bernard during the past week or so — no wonder the brontosaurus had been in a frenzy of panic when all sorts of inexplicable things had been happening to it and the only reason it could see for them

was two tiny creatures that were just barely visible to it!

But the patient's species had roamed its home planet for a hundred million years, and it personally was immensely long-lived. Although its two brains were tiny it was really much smarter than a dog, so that very soon Conway had it trying to sit and beg.

And two hours later the brontosaurus took off.

It rose rapidly from the ground, a monstrous, ungainly and indescribable object with its massive legs making involuntary walking movements and the great neck and tail hanging down and waving slowly. Obviously it was the brain in the sacral area and not the cranium which

was handling the levitation, Conway thought, as the great reptile approached the bunch of palm fronds which were balanced tantalisingly two hundred feet above its head. But that was a detail, it was levitating, that was the main thing. Unless – "Are you helping?" Conway said sharply to Arretapec.

"No."

The reply was flat and emotionless by necessity, but had the VUXG been human it would have been a yell of sheer triumph.

"Good old Emily!" somebody shouted in Conway's phones, probably one of the beam operators, then, "Look, she's passing it!"

The brontosaur had missed the suspended

bundle of foliage and was still rising fast. It made a clumsy, convulsive attempt to reach it in passing, which had set up a definite spin. Further wild movements of neck and tail were aggravating it...

"Better get her down out of there," said a second voice urgently, "That artificial sun could scorch her tail off."

"...And that spin is making it panicky," agreed Conway. "Tractor beam men – I"

But he was too late. Sun, earth and sky were careening in wild, twisting loops around a being which had been hither to accustomed to solid ground under its feet. It wanted down or up, or *somewhere*. Despite Arretapec's frantic attempts to soothe it, it teleported again.

Conway saw the great mountain of flesh and bone go hurtling off at a tangent, at least four times faster than its original speed. He yelled, "H-sector men! Cushion it down, *gently*." But there was neither time nor space for the pressor beam men to slow it down gently. To keep it from crashing fatally to the surface — also through the underlying plating and out into space outside — they had to slow it down steadily but firmly, and to the brontosaurus that necessarily sharp braking must have felt like a physical blow. It teleported again.

"C-sector, it's coming at you!"

But at C it was a repetition of what happened with H, the beast panicked and shot off in another direction. And so it went on, with the great reptile rocketing from one side of the ship's interior to the other until...

"Skempton here," said a brisk, authoritative voice. "My men say the pressor beam mounts were not designed to stand this sort of thing. Insufficiently braced. The hull plating has sprung in eight places."

"Can't you – "

"We're sealing the leaks as fast as we can," Skempton cut in, answering Conway's question before he could ask it. "But this battering is shaking the ship apart..."

Dr. Arretapec joined in at that point.

"Doctor Conway," the being said, "while, it is obvious that the patient has shown a surprising aptitude with its new talent, its use is controlled because of its fear and confusion. This traumatic experience will

cause irreparable damage, I am convinced, to the being's thinking processes..."

"Conway, *look out!*" The reptile had come to a halt near ground level a few hundred yards away, then shot off at right angles towards Conway's position. But it was travelling a straight line inside a hollow sphere, and the surface was curving up to meet it. Conway saw the hurtling body lurch and spin as the beam operators sought desperately to check its velocity. Then suddenly the mighty body was ripping through the low, thickly-growing trees, then it was ploughing a wide, shallow furrow through the soft, swampy ground and with a small mountain of earth-uprooted vegetation piling up in front of it, Conway was right in its path.

Before he could adjust the control of his anti-gravity pack the ground came up and

fell on him. For a few minutes he was too dazed to realise why it was he couldn't move, then he saw that he was buried to the waist in a sticky cement of splintered branches and muddy earth. The heavings and shudderings he felt in the ground were the brontosaurus climbing to its feet. He looked up to see the great mass towering over him, saw it turn awkwardly and heard the sucking and crackling noises as the massive, pile-driver legs drove almost knee deep into the soil and underbrush.

Emily was heading for the lake again, and between the water and it was Conway...

He shouted and struggled in a frenzied attempt to attract attention, because the anti-grav and radio were smashed and he was stuck fast. The great reptilian mountain rolled up to him, the immense, slowly-waving neck was cutting off the light

and one gigantic forefoot was poised to both kill and bury him in one operation, then Conway was yanked suddenly upwards and to the side to where a prune in a gob of syrup was floating in the air.

"In the excitement of the moment," Arretapec said, "I had forgotten that you require a mechanical device to teleport. Please accept my apologies."

"Q-quite all right," said Conway shakily. He made an effort to steady his jumping nerves, then caught sight of a pressor beam crew on the surface below him. He called suddenly, "Get another radio and projector locus here, quick!"

Ten minutes later he was bruised, battered but ready to continue again. He stood at the water's edge with Arretapec hovering at his shoulder and his fifty-foot image again

rising above him. The VUXG doctor, in rapport with the brontosaur under the surface of the lake, reported that success or failure hung in the balance. The patient had gone through what was to it a mind-wrecking experience, but the fact that it was now in what it felt to be the safety of under-water – where it had hitherto sought refuge from hunger and the attacks of its enemies – was, together with the mental reassurances of Arretapec, exerting a steadying influence.

At times hopefully, at others in utter despair, Conway waited. Sometimes the strength of his feelings made him swear. It would not have been so bad, meant so much to him, if he hadn't caught that glimpse of what Arretapec's purpose had been, or if he had not grown to like the rather prim and over-condescending ball of goo so much. But any being with a mind

like that who intended doing what it hoped to do had a right to be condescending.

Abruptly the huge head broke surface and the enormous body heaved itself onto the bank. Slowly, ponderously, the hind legs bent double and the long, tapering neck stretched upwards. The brontosaurus wanted to play again.

Something caught in Conway's throat. He looked to where a dozen bundles of succulent greenery lay ready for use, with one already being manoeuvred towards him. He waved his arm abruptly and said, "Oh, give it the whole lot, it deserves them..."

"...So that when Arretapec saw the conditions on the patient's world," Conway said a little stiffly, "and its precognitive

faculty told him what the brontosaur's most likely future would be, it just had to try to change it."

Conway was in the Chief Psychologist's office making a preliminary, verbal report and the intent faces of O'Mara, Hardin, Skempton and the hospital's Director encircled him. He felt anything but comfortable as, clearing his throat, he went on, "But Arretapec belongs to an old, proud race, and being telepathic added to its sensitivity — telepaths really feel what others think about them. What Arretapec proposed doing was so radical, it would leave itself and its race open to such ridicule if it failed, that it just had to be secretive. Conditions on the brontosaur's planet indicated that there would be no rise of an intelligent life-form after the great reptiles became extinct, and geologically speaking that extinction would not be long

delayed. The patient's species had been around for a long time – that armoured tail and amphibious nature had allowed it to survive more predatory and specialised contemporaries – but climatic changes were imminent and it could not follow the sun towards the equator because the planetary surface was composed of a large number of island continents. A brontosaurus could not cross an ocean. But if these giant reptiles could be made to develop the psi faculty of teleportation, the ocean barrier would disappear and with it the danger from encroaching cold and shortage of food. It was this which Dr. Arretapec succeeded in doing."

O'Mara broke in at that point: "If Arretapec gave the brontosaurus the teleportive ability by working directly on its brain, why can't the same be done for us?"

"Probably because we've managed fine without it," replied Conway. "The patient, on the other hand, was shown and made to understand that this faculty was 'necessary for its survival. Once this is realised the ability will be used and passed on, because it is latent in nearly all species. Now that Arretapec has proved the idea possible his whole race will want to get in on it. Fostering intelligence on what would otherwise be a dead planet is the sort of *big* project which appeals to those high-minded types..."

Conway was thinking of that single, precognitive glimpse he had had into Arretapec's mind, of the civilisation which would develop on the brontosaur's world and the monstrous yet strangely graceful beings that it would contain in some far, far, future day. But he did not mention these thoughts aloud. Instead he said,

"Like most telepaths Arretapec was both squeamish and inclined to discount purely physical methods of investigation. It was not until I introduced him to Dr. Mannon's dog, and pointed out that a good way to get an animal to use a new ability was to teach it tricks with it, that we got anywhere. I showed that trick where I throw cushions at the dog and after wrestling with them for a while it arranges them in a heap and lets me throw it on top of them, thus demonstrating that simple-minded creatures don't mind – within limits, that is – a little rough-housing – "

"So that," said O'Mara, gazing reflectively at the ceiling, "is what you do in your spare time..."

Colonel Skempton coughed. He said, "You're playing down your own part in this. Your foresight in stuffing that hulk with

tractor and pressor beams..."

"There's just one other thing before I see it off," Conway broke in hastily. "Arretepec heard some of the men calling the patient Emily. It would like to know why."

"It would," said O'Mara disgustedly. He pursed his lips, then went on, "Apparently one the Maintenance-man with an appetite for early fiction — the Bronte sisters, Charlotte, Emily and Anne to be exact — dubbed our patient Emily Brontosaurus. I must say that I feel a pathological interest in a mind which thinks like that..." O'Mara looked as though there was a bad smell in the room.

Conway groaned in sympathy. As he turned to go, he thought that his last and hardest job might be in explaining what a

pun was to the high-minded Dr. Arretapec.

Next day Arretapec and the dinosaur left, the Monitor transport officer whose job it was to keep the hospital supplied heaved a great sigh of relief, and Conway found himself on ward duty again. But this time he was something more than a medical mechanic. He had been placed in charge of a section of the Nursery, and although he had to use data, drugs and case-histories supplied by Thornnastor, the Diagnostician-in-Charge of Pathology, there was nobody breathing directly down his neck. He could walk through his section and tell himself that these were *his* wards. And O'Mara had even promised him an assistant "...It has been apparent since you first arrived here," the Major had told him, "that you mix more readily with E-Ts than with members of your own species. Saddling you with Dr. Arretapec was a test,

which you passed with honours, and the assistant I'll be giving you in a few days might be another."

O'Mara had paused then, shook his head wonderingly and went on, "Not only do you get on exceptionally well with E-Ts, but I don't hear a single whisper on the grapevine of you chasing the females of our species..."

"I don't have the time," said Conway seriously. "I doubt if I ever will."

"Oh, well, misogyny is an allowable neurosis," O'Mara had replied, then had gone on to discuss the new assistant. Subsequently Conway had returned to his wards and worked much harder than if there had been a Senior. Physician breathing down his neck. He was too busy to hear the rumours which began to go

around regarding the odd patient who had been admitted to Observation Ward Three.

Part Four

Visitor At Large

DESPITE THE vast resources of medical and surgical skill available, resources which were acknowledged second to none anywhere in the civilised Galaxy, there had to be times when a case arrived in Sector General for which nothing whatever could be done. This particular patient was of classification SRTT, which was a physiological type never before encountered in the hospital. It was amoebic, possessed the ability to extrude any limbs, sensory organs or protective tegument necessary to the environment in which it found itself, and was so fantastically adaptable that it was difficult to imagine how one of these beings could ever fall sick in the first place.

The lack of symptoms was the most baffling aspect of the case. There was in evidence none of the visually alarming growths or malfunctionings to which so many of the extraterrestrial species were prone, nor were there any bacteria present in what could be considered harmful quantities. Instead the patient was simply *melting* – quietly, cleanly and without fuss or bother, like a piece of ice left in a warm room, its body was literally turning to water. Nothing that was tried had any effect in halting the process and, while they continued their attempts at finding a cure with even greater intensity, the Diagnosticians and lesser doctors in attendance had begun to realise a little sadly that the run of medical miracles produced with such monotonous regularity by Sector Twelve General Hospital was due to be broken.

And it was for that reason alone that one of the strictest rules of the hospital was temporarily relaxed.

"I suppose the best place to start is at the beginning," said Dr. Conway, trying hard not to stare at the iridescent and not quite atrophied wings of his new assistant. "At Reception, where the problems of admittance are dealt with."

Conway waited to see if the other had any comments, and continuing to walk in the direction of the stated objective while doing so. Rather than walk beside his companion he maintained a two-yard lead – not out of any wish to give offence but for the simple reason that he was afraid of inflicting severe physical damage on his assistant if he strayed any closer than that.

The new assistant was a GLNO – six-

legged, exoskeletal and insect-like, with the empathic faculty – from the planet Cinruss. The gravity-pull of its home world was less than one-twelfth Earth-normal, which was the reason for an insect species growing to such size and becoming dominant, so that it wore two anti-G belts to neutralise the attraction which would otherwise have mashed it into ruin against the corridor floor. One neutraliser belt would have been adequate for this purpose, but Conway did not blame the being one bit for wanting to play safe. It was a spindly, awkward-looking and incredibly fragile life-form, and its name was Dr. Prilicla.

Prilicla had previous experience both in planetary and in the smaller multi-environment hospitals and so was not completely green, Conway had been told, but it would naturally feel at a loss before

the size and complexity of Sector General. Conway was to be its guide and mentor for a while and then, when his present period of duty in charge of the nursery was complete, he would hand over Prilicla. Apparently the hospital's Director had decided that light-gravity life-forms with their extreme sensitivity and delicacy of touch would be particularly suited to the care and handling of the more fragile E-T embryos.

It was a good idea, Conway thought as he hastily interposed himself between Prilicla and a Tralthan intern who lumbered past on six elephantine feet, if the low-gravity life-form in question could survive the association with its more massive and clumsy colleagues.

"You understand," said Conway as he guided the GLNO towards Reception's

control-room, "that getting some of the patients into the place is a problem in itself. It isn't so bad with the small ones, but Tralthans, or a forty-foot long AUGL from Chalderescol..." Conway broke off suddenly and said, "Here we are."

Through a wide, transparent wall section could be seen a room containing three massive control desks, only one of which was currently occupied. The being before it was a Nidian, and a group of indicator lights showed that it had just made contact with a ship approaching the hospital.

Conway said, "Listen..."

"Identify yourself, please," said the red teddy-bear in its staccato, barking speech, which was filtered through Conway's translator as flat and toneless English and which came to Prilicla as equally

unemotionless Cinrusskin. "Patient, visitor or Staff, and species?"

"Visitor," came the reply, "and Human."

There was a second's pause, then: "Give your physiological classification please," said the red-furred receptionist with a wink towards the two watchers. "All intelligent races refer to their own species as human and think of all others as being non-human, so that what you call yourself has no meaning..."

Conway only half heard the conversation after that because he was so engrossed in trying to visualise what a being with that classification could look like. The double-T meant that both its shape and physical characteristics were variable, R that it had high heat and pressure tolerance, and the S in that combination...! I If there had not

actually been one waiting outside, Conway would not have believed such a weird beastie could exist.

And the visitor was an important person, apparently, because the receptionist was now busily engaged in passing on the news of its arrival to various beings within the hospital – most of whom were Diagnosticians, no less. All at once Conway was intensely curious to see this highly unusual being, but thought that he would not be showing a very good example to Prilicla if he dashed off on a rubbernecking expedition when they had work to do elsewhere. Also, his assistant was still very much an unknown quantity where Conway was concerned – Prilicla might be one of those touchy individuals who held that to look at a member of another species for no other reason than to satisfy mere curiosity was a grievous

insult...

"If it would not interfere with more urgent duties," broke in the flat, translated voice of Prilicla, "I would very much like to see this visitor."

Bless you! thought Conway, but outwardly pretended to mull over the latter. Finally he said, "Normally I could not allow that, but as the lock where the SRTT is entering is not far froth here and there is some time to spare before we are due at our wards, I expect it will be all right to indulge your curiosity just this once. Please follow me, Doctor."

As he waved goodbye to the furry receptionist, Conway thought that it was a very good thing that Prilicla's Translator was incapable of transferring the strongly ironic content of those last words, so that

the other was not aware what a rise Conway was taking out of him. And then suddenly he stopped in his mental tracks. Prilicla, he realised uncomfortably, was an empath. The being had not said very much since they had met a short time ago, but everything that it had said had backed up Conway's feelings in the particular matter under discussion. His new assistant was not a telepath – it could not read thoughts – but it was sensitive to feelings and emotions and would therefore have been aware of Conway's curiosity.

Conway felt like kicking himself for forgetting that empathic faculty, and wryly wondered just who had been taking the rise out of which.

He had to console himself with the thought that at least he was agreeable, and not like some of the people he had been attached

to recently like Dr. Arretapec.

Lock Six, where the SRTT was to be admitted, could have been reached in a few minutes if Conway had used the short cut through the water-filled corridor leading to the AUGL operating room and across the surgical ward of the chlorine-breathing PVSJs. But it would have meant donning one of the lightweight diving suits for protection, and while he could climb in and out of such a suit in no time at all, he very much doubted if the ultra-leggy Prilicla could do so. They therefore had to take the long way round, and hurry.

At one point a Tralthan wearing the gold-edged armband of a Diagnostician and an Earth-human maintenance engineer overtook them, the FGLI charging along like a runaway tank and the Earthman having to trot to keep up. Conway and

Prilicla stood aside respectfully to allow the Diagnostician to pass – as well as to avoid being flattened – and then continued. A scrap of overheard conversation identified the two beings as part of the arriving SRTT's reception committee, and from the somewhat caustic tone of the Earth-human's remarks it was obvious that the visitor had arrived earlier than expected.

When they turned a corner a few seconds later and came within sight of the great entry lock Conway saw a sight which made him smile in spite of himself. Three corridors converged on the antechamber of Lock Six on this level as well as two others on upper and lower levels which reached it via sloping ramps, and figures were hurrying along each one. As well as the Tralthan and Earthman who had just passed them there was another Tralthan, two of the DBLF caterpillars and a spiny,

membranous Illensan in a transparent protective suit – who had just emerged from the adjacent chlorine-filled corridor of the PVSJ section – all heading for the inner seal of the big Lock, already swinging open on the expected visitor. To Conway it seemed to be a wildly ludicrous situation, and he had a sudden mental picture of the whole crazy menagerie of them coming together with a crash in the same spot at the same time...

Then while he was still smiling at the thought, comedy changed swiftly and without warning to tragedy.

Chapter Two

As the visitor entered the antechamber and the seal closed behind it Conway saw something that was a little like a crocodile with horn-tipped tentacles and a lot like nothing he had ever seen before. He saw the being shrink away from the figures hurrying to meet it, then suddenly dart towards the PVSJ – who was, Conway was to remember later, both the nearest and the smallest. Everybody seemed to be shouting at once then, so much so that Conway's and presumably everyone else's Translators went into an ear-piercing squeal of oscillation through sheer

overload.

Faced by the teeth and hard-tipped tentacles of the charging visitor the Illensan PVSJ, no doubt thinking of the flimsiness of the envelope which held its life-saving chlorine around it, fled back into the inter-corridor lock for the safety of its own section. The visitor, its way suddenly blocked by a Tralthan booming unheard reassurances at it, turned suddenly and scuttled for the same airlock...

All such locks were fitted with rapid action controls in case of emergency, controls which caused one door to open and the other to shut simultaneously instead of waiting for the chamber to be evacuated and refilled with the required atmosphere. The PVSJ, with the berserk visitor close behind it and its suit already torn by the SRTT's teeth so that it was in imminent

danger of dying from oxygen poisoning, rightly considered his case to be an emergency and activated the rapid-action controls. It was perhaps too frightened to notice that the visitor was not completely into the lock, and that when the inner door opened the outer one would neatly cut the visitor in two...

There was so much shouting and confusion around the lock that Conway did not see who the quick-thinking person was who saved the visitor's life by pressing yet another emergency button, the one which caused both doors to open together. This action kept the SRTT from being cut in two, but there was now a direct opening into the PVSJ section from which billowed thick, yellow clouds of chlorine gas. Before Conway could react, contamination detectors in the corridor walls touched off the alarm siren and simultaneously closed

the air-tight doors in the immediate vicinity, and they were all neatly trapped.

For a wild moment Conway fought the urge to run to the airtight doors and beat on them with his fists. Then he thought of plunging through that poisonous fog to another intersection lock which was on the other side of it. But he could see a Maintenance-man and one of the DBLF caterpillars in it already, both so overcome with chlorine that Conway doubted if they could live long enough to put on the suits. Could he, he wondered sickly, get over there? The lock chamber also contained helmets good for ten minutes or so – that was demanded by the safety regulations – but to do it he would have to hold his breath for at least three minutes and keep his eyes jammed shut, because if he get a single whiff of that gas or it got at his eyes he would be helplessly disabled. But how

could he pass that heaving, struggling mass of Tralthan legs and tentacles spread across the corridor floor while groping about with his eyes shut...?

The fear-filled chaos of his thoughts was interrupted by Prilicla, who said, "Chlorine is lethal to my species. Please excuse me."

Prilicla was doing something peculiar to itself. The long, many-jointed legs were waving and jerking about as though performing some weird, ritual dance and two of the four manipulatory appendages – whose possession was the reason for its species' fame as surgeons – were doing complicated things with what looked like rolls of transparent plastic sheeting. Conway did not see exactly how it happened but suddenly his GLNO assistant was swathed in a loose, transparent cover through which protruded

its six legs and two manipulators – its body, wings and other two members, which were busily engaged in spraying sealing solution on the leg openings, were completely covered by it. The loose covering bellied out and became taut, proving that it was air-tight.

"I didn't know you had..." Conway began, then with a surge of hope bursting up within him he gabbled, "Listen. Do exactly as I tell you. You've got to get me a helmet, *quickly...*" But the hope died just as suddenly before he finished giving the GLNO his instructions. Prilicla could doubtless find a helmet for him, but how could the being ever hope to make it to the lock where they were kept through that struggling mass on the floor between. One blow could tear off a leg or cave in that flimsy exo-skeleton like an egg-shell. He couldn't ask the GLNO to do it, it would be

murder.

He was about to cancel all previous instructions and tell the GLNO to stay put and save itself when Prilicla dashed across the corridor floor, ran diagonally up the wall and disappeared into the chlorine fog travelling along the ceiling, Conway reminded himself that many insect lifeforms possessed sucker-tipped feet and began to feel hopeful again, so much so that other sensations began to register.

Close beside him the wall annunciator was informing everyone in the hospital that there was contamination in the region of Lock Six, while below it the intercom unit was emitting red light and harsh buzzing sounds as somebody in Maintenance Division tried to find out whether or not the contaminated area was occupied. The drifting gas was almost on him as Conway

snatched at the intercom mike.

"Quiet and listen!" he shouted. "Conway here, at Lock Six. Two FGLIs, two DBLFs, one DBDG all with chlorine poisoning not yet fatal. One PVSJ in damaged protective suit with oxy-poisoning and possibly other injuries, and one up there —" A sudden stinging sensation in the eyes made Conway drop the mike hurriedly. He backed away until stopped by the airtight door and watched the yellow mist creep nearer. He could see practically nothing of what was going on down the corridor now, and an agonising eternity seemed to go by before the spindly shape of Prilicla came swinging along the ceiling above him.

Chapter Three

The helmet which Prilicla brought was in a reality a mask, a mask with a self-contained air supply which, when in position, adhered firmly along the edge of the hair line, cheeks and lower jaw. Its air was good only for a very limited time – ten minutes or so – but with it on and the danger of death temporarily removed, Conway discovered that he could think much more clearly.

His first action was to go through the still open intersection lock. The PVSJ inside it

was motionless and with the grey blush, the beginning of a type of skin cancer, spreading over its body. To the PVSJ life-form oxygen was vicious stuff. As gently as possible he dragged the Illensan into its own section and to a nearby storage compartment which he remembered being there. Pressure in this section was slightly greater than that maintained for warm-blooded oxygen-breathers so that where the PVSJ was concerned the air here was reasonably pure. Conway shut it in the compartment, after first grabbing an armful of the woven plastic sheets, in this section the equivalent of bed linen. There was no sign of the SRTT.

Back in the other corridor he explained to Prilicla what he wanted done – the Earth-human he had seen earlier had succeeded in donning his suit, but was blundering about, eyes streaming and coughing

violently and was obviously incapable of giving any assistance. Conway picked his way around the weakly moving or unconscious bodies to the seal of Lock Six and opened it. There was a neatly racked row of air bottles on the wall inside. He lifted down two of them and staggered out.

Prilicla had one unconscious form already covered with a sheet. Conway cracked the valve of an air-bottle and slid it under the covering, then watched as the plastic sheet bellied and rippled slightly with the air being released underneath it. It was the crudest possible form of oxygen tent, Conway thought, but the best that could be done at the moment. He left for more bottles.

After the third trip Conway began to notice the warning signs. He was sweating profusely, his head was splitting and big

black splotches were beginning to blot out his vision – his air supply was running out. It was high time he took off the emergency helmet, stuck his own head under a sheet like the others and waited for the rescuers to arrive. He took a few steps towards the nearest sheeted figure, and the floor hit him. His heart was banging thunderously in his chest, his lungs were on fire and all at once he didn't even have the strength to pull off the helmet...

Conway was forced from his state of deep and oddly comfortable unconsciousness by pain: something was making strong and repeated attempts to cave in his chest. He stuck it just as long as he could, then opened his eyes and said. "Get off me, dammit, I'm all right!"

The hefty intern who had been enthusiastically engaged in giving Conway

artificial respiration climbed to his feet. He said, "When we arrived, daddylonglegs here said you had ceased to emote. I was worried about you for a moment – well, slightly worried." He grinned and added, "If you can walk and talk, O'Mara wants to see you."

Conway grunted and rose to his feet. Blowers and filtering apparatus had been set up in the corridor and were rapidly clearing the air of the last vestiges of chlorine and the casualties were being removed, some on tented stretcher-carriers and others being assisted by their rescuers. He fingered the raw area of forehead caused by the hurried removal of his helmet and took a few great gulps of air just to reassure himself that the nightmare of a few minutes ago was really over.

"Thank you, Doctor," he said feelingly.

"Don't mention it, Doctor," said the intern.

They found O'Mara in the Educator Room. The Chief Psychologist wasted no time on preliminaries. He pointed to a chair for Conway and indicated a sort of surrealistic waste-paper basket to Prilicla and barked, "What happened?"

The room was in shadow except for the glow of indicator lights on the Educator equipment and a single lamp on O'Mara's desk. All Conway could see of the psychologist as he began his story was two hard, competent hands projecting from the sleeves of a dark green uniform and a pair of steady grey eyes in a shadowed face. The hands did not move and the eyes never left him while Conway was speaking.

When he was finished O'Mara sighed and was silent for several seconds, then he said, "There were four of our top Diagnosticians at Lock Six just then, beings this hospital could ill afford to lose. The prompt action you took certainly saved at least three of their lives, so you're a couple of heroes. But I'll spare your blushes and not belabour that point. Neither," he added drily, "will I embarrass you by asking what you were doing there in the first place."

Conway coughed. He said, "What I'd like to know is why the SRTT ran amok like that. Because of the crowd running to meet it, I'd say, except that no intelligent, civilised being would behave like that. The only visitors we allow here are either government people or visiting specialists, neither of which are the type to be scared at the sight of an alien lifeform. And why so

many Diagnosticians to meet it in the first place?"

"They were there," replied O'Mara, "because they were anxious to see what an SRTT looked like when it was not trying to look like something else. This data might have aided them in a case they are working on. Also, with a hitherto unknown life-form like that it is impossible to guess at what made it act as it did. And finally, it is not the type of visitor which we allow here, but we had to break the rules this time because its parent is in the hospital, a terminal case."

Conway said softly, "I see."

A Monitor Lieutenant came into the room at that point and hurried across to O'Mara. "Excuse me, sir," he said. "I've been able to find one item which may help us with the

search for the visitor. A DBLF nurse reports seeing a PVSJ moving away from the area of the accident at about the right time. To one of the DBLF caterpillars the PVSJs are anything but pretty, as you know, but the nurse says that this one looked worse than usual, a real freak. So much so that the DBLF was sure that it was a patient suffering from something pretty terrible – "

"You checked that we have no PVSJ suffering from the malady described?"

"Yes, sir. There is no such case."

O'Mara looked suddenly grim. He said, "Very good, Carson, you know what to do next," and nodded dismissal.

Conway had been finding it hard to contain himself during the conversation, and with

the departure of the Lieutenant he burst out, "The thing I saw come out of the airlock had tentacles and... and... Well, it wasn't anything like a PVSJ. I know that an SRTT is able to modify its physical structure, of course, but so radically and in such a short time...!"

Abruptly O'Mara stood up. He said, "We know practically nothing about this life-form – its needs, capabilities or emotional response patterns – and it is high time we found out. I'm going to build a fire under Colinson in Communications to see what he can dig up; environment, evolutionary background, cultural and social influences and so on. We can't have a visitor running around loose like this, it's bound to make a nuisance of itself through sheer ignorance.

But what I want you two to do is this," he went on, "Keep an eye open for any odd-looking patients or embryos in the Nursery

sections. Lieutenant Carson has just left to get on the PA and make these instructions general. If you do find somebody who may be our SRTT approach them *gently*. Be reassuring, make no sudden moves and be sure to avoid confusing it, that only one of you talks at once. And contact me immediately."

When they were outside again Conway decided that nothing further could be done in the current work period, and postponing the rounds of their wards for another hour, led the way to the vast room which served as a dining hall for all the warm-blooded oxygen-breathers on the hospital's Staff. The place was, as usual, crowded, and although it was divided up into sections for the widely variant life-forms present, Conway could see many tables where three or four different classifications had come together – with extreme discomfort

for some – to talk shop.

Conway pointed out a vacant table to Prilicla and began working towards it, only to have his assistant – aided by its still functional wings – get there before him and in time to foil two Maintenance-men making for the same spot. A few heads turned during this fifty yard flight, but only briefly – the diners were used to much stranger sights than that.

"I expect most of our food is suited to your metabolism," said Conway when he was seated, "but do you have any special preferences?"

Prilicla had, and Conway nearly choked when he heard them. But it was not the combination of well-cooked spaghetti and raw carrots that was so bad, it was the way the GLNO set about eating the spaghetti

when it arrived. With all four eating appendages working furiously Prilicla wove it into a sort of rope which *was* passed into the being's beak-like mouth. Conway was not usually affected by this sort of thing, but the sight was definitely doing things to his stomach.

Suddenly Prilicla' stopped. "My method of ingestion is disturbing you," it said. "I will go to another table – "

"No, no," said Conway quickly, realising that his feelings had been picked up by the empath. "That won't be necessary, I assure you. But it is a point of etiquette here that, whenever it is possible, a being dining in mixed company uses the same eating tools as its host or senior at the table. Er, do you think you could manage a fork?"

Prilicla could manage a fork. Conway had

never seen spaghetti disappear so fast.

From the subject of food the talk drifted not too unnaturally to the hospital's Diagnosticians and the Educator Tape system without which these august beings – and indeed the whole hospital – could not function.

Diagnosticians deservedly had the respect and admiration of everyone in the hospital – and a certain amount of the pity as well. For it was not simply knowledge which the Educator gave them, the whole personality of the entity who had possessed that knowledge was impressed on their brains as well. In effect the Diagnostician subjected himself or itself voluntarily to the most drastic type of multiple schizophrenia, and with the alien other components sharing their minds so utterly *different* in every respect that they often did not even

share the same system of logic.

Their one and only common denominator was the need of all doctors, regardless of size, shape or number of legs, to cure the sick.

There was a DBDG Earth human Diagnostician at a table nearby who was visibly having to force himself to eat a perfectly ordinary steak. Conway happened to know that this man was engaged on a case which necessitated using a large amount of the knowledge contained in the Tralthan physiology tape which he had been given. The use of this knowledge had brought into prominence within his mind the personality of the Tralthan who had furnished the brain record, and Tralthan abhorred meat in all its forms...

Chapter Four

After lunch Conway took Prilicla to the first of the wards to which they were assigned, and on the way continued to reel off more statistics and background information. The Hospital comprised three hundred and eighty-four levels and accurately reproduced the environments of the sixty-eight different forms of intelligent life currently known to the Galactic Federation. Conway was not trying to cow Prilicla with the vastness of the great hospital nor to boast, although he was intensely proud of the fact that he had gained a post in this very famous establishment. It was simply

that he was uneasy about his assistant's means of protecting itself against the conditions it would shortly meet, and this was his way of working around to the subject.

But he need not have worried, for Prilicla demonstrated how the light, almost diaphanous, suit which had saved it at Lock Six could be strengthened from inside by a scaled down adaptation of the type of force-field use as meteorite protection of interstellar ships. When necessary its legs could be folded so as to be within the protective covering as well, instead of projecting outside it as they had done at the lock.

While they were changing prior to entering the AUGL Nursery Ward, which was their first call, Conway began filling in his assistant on the case history of the

occupants.

The fully-grown physiological type AUGL was a forty foot long, oviparous, armoured fish-like life-form native of Chalderescol II, but the beings now in the ward for observation had been hatched only six weeks ago and measured only three feet. Two previous hatchings by the same mother had, as had this one, been in all respects normal and with the offspring seemingly in perfect health, yet two months later they had all died. A PM performed on their home world gave the cause of death as extreme calcification of the articular cartilage in practically every joint in the body, but had been unable to shed any light on the cause of the death. Now Sector General was keeping a watchful eye on the latest hatching, and Conway was hoping that it would be a case of third time lucky.

"At present I look them over every day," Conway went on, "and on every third day take an AUGL tape and give them a thorough checkup. Now that you are assisting me this will also apply to you. But when you take this tape I'd advise you to have it erased immediately after the examination, unless you would *like* to wander around for the rest of the day with half of your brain convinced that you are *a* fish and wanting to act accordingly... "

"That would be an intriguing but, no doubt confusing hybrid," agreed Prilicla. The GLNO was now enclosed completely – with the exception of two manipulators – in the bubble of its protective suit, which it had weighed sufficiently for it not to be hampered by too much bouyancy. Seeing that Conway was also ready, it operated the lock controls, and as they entered the great tank of warm, greenish water that

was the AUGL ward it added, "Are the patients responding to treatment?"

Conway shook his head. Then realising that the gesture probably meant nothing to the GLNO he said, "We are still at the exploratory stage – treatment has not yet begun. But I've had a few ideas, which I can't properly discuss with you until we both take the AUGL tape tomorrow and am fairly certain that two of our three patients will come through – in effect, one of them will have to be used as a guinea-pig in order to save the others. The symptoms appear and develop very quickly," he continued, "which is why I want such a close watch kept on them. Now that the danger point is so close I think I'll make it three-hourly, and we'll work out a timetable so's neither of us will miss too much sleep. You see, the quicker we spot the first symptoms the more time we have to act

and the greater the possibility of saving all three of them. I'm very keen to do the hat-trick."

Prilicla wouldn't know what a hat-trick was either, Conway thought, but the being would quickly learn how to interpret his nods, gestures and figures of speech — Conway had had to do the same in his early days with E-T superiors, sometimes wondering fulminatingly why somebody did not make a tape on Alien Esoterics to aid junior interns in his position. But these were only surface thoughts. At the back of his mind, so steady and so sharp that it might have been painted there, was the picture of a young, almost embryonic life-form whose developing exo-skeleton — the hundred or so fiat, bony plates normally free to slide or move on flexible hinges of cartilage so as to allow mobility and breathing — was about to become a

petrified fossil imprisoning, for a very short time, the frantic consciousness within...

"How can I assist you at the moment?" asked Prilicla, bringing Conway's mind back from near future to present time with a rush. The GLNO was eyeing the three thin, streamlined shapes darting about the great tank and obviously wondering how it was going to stop one long enough to examine it. It added, "They're fast, aren't they?"

"Yes, and very fragile," said Conway. "Also they are so young that for present purposes they can be considered mindless. They frighten easily and any attempt to approach them closely sends them into such a panic that they swim madly about until exhausted or injure themselves against the tank walls. What we have to do is lay a minefield..."

Quickly Conway explained and demonstrated how to place a pattern of anaesthetic bulbs which dissolved in the water and how, gently and at a distance, to manoeuvre their elusive patients through it. Later, while they were examining the three small, unconscious forms and Conway saw how sensitive and precise was the touch of Prilicla's manipulators and the corresponding sharpness of the GLNO's mind, his hopes for all three of the infant AUGLs increased.

They left the warm and to Conway rather pleasant environment of the AUGLs for the 'hot' ward of their section. This time the checking of the occupants was done with the aid of remote-controlled mechanisms from behind twenty feet of shielding. There was nothing of an urgent nature in this ward, and before leaving Conway pointed

out the complicated masses of plumbing surrounding it. The maintenance Division he explained, used the 'hot' ward as a standby power pile to light and heat the hospital.

Constantly in the background the wall annunciators kept droning out the progress of the search for the SRTT visitor. It had not been found yet, and cases of mistaken identity and of beings seeing things were mounting steadily. Conway had not thought much about the SRTT since leaving O'Mara, but now he was beginning to feel a little anxious at the thought of what the runaway visitor might do in this section especially – not to mention what some of the infant patients might do to it. If only he knew more about it, had some idea of its limitations. He decided to call O'Mara.

In reply to Conway's request the Chief

Psychologist said, "Our latest information is that the SRTT life-form evolved on a planet with an eccentric orbit around its primary. Geologic, climatic and temperature changes were such that a high degree of adaptability was necessary for survival. Before they attained a civilisation their means of defence was either to assume as frightening an aspect as possible or to copy the physical form of their attackers in the hope that they would escape detection in this way – protective mimicry being the favourite method of avoiding danger, and so often used that the process has become almost involuntary. There are some other items regarding mass and dimensions at different ages. They are a very long-lived species – and this not particularly helpful collection of data, which was digested from the report of the survey ship which discovered the planet, ends by saying that all the foregoing is for our information only and that these beings do not take sick."

O'Mara paused briefly, then added, "Hah!"

"I agree," said Conway.

"One item we have which might explain its panicking on arrival," O'Mara went on, "is that it is their custom for the very youngest to be present at the death of a parent rather than the eldest – there is an unusually strong emotional bond between parent and last-born. Estimates of mass place our runaway as being very young. Not a baby, of course, but definitely nowhere near maturity."

Conway was still digesting this when the Major continued, "As to its limitations, I'd say that the Methane section is too cold for it and the radioactive wards too hot – also that glorified Turkish bath on level 18 where they breathe super-heated steam.

Apart from those, your guess is as good as mine where it may turn up."

"It might help a little if I could see this SRTT's parent," Conway said. "Is that possible?"

There was a lengthy pause, then: "Just barely," said O'Mara drily. "The immediate vicinity of that patient is literally crawling with Diagnosticians and other high-powered talent... But come up after you've finished your rounds and I'll try to fix it."

"Thank you, sir," said Conway and broke the circuit.

He still felt a vague uneasiness about the SRTT visitor, a dark premonition that he had not yet finished with this E-T juvenile delinquent who was the ultimate in quick-

change artists. Maybe, he thought sourly, his current duties had brought out the mother in him, but at the thought of the havoc which that SRTT could cause – the damage to equipment and fittings, the interruption of important and closely-timed courses of treatment and the physical injury, perhaps even death, to the more fragile life-forms through its ignorant blundering about – Conway felt himself go a little sick.

For the failure to capture the runaway had made plain one very disquieting fact, and that was that the SRTT was not too young and immature not to know how to work the intersection locks...

Half angrily, Conway pushed these useless anxieties to the back of his mind and began explaining to Prilicla about the patients in the ward they were going to visit next, and

the protective measures and examinative procedures necessary when handling them.

This ward contained twenty-eight infants of the FROB classification — low, squat, immensely strong beings with a horny covering that was like flexible armour plate. Adults of the species with their increased mass tended to be slow and ponderous, but the infants could move surprisingly fast despite the condition of four times Earth-normal gravity and pressure in which they lived. Heavy-duty suits were called for in these conditions and the floor level of the ward was never used by visiting physicians or nursing staff except in cases of the gravest emergency. Patients for examination were raised from the floor by a grab and lifting apparatus to the cupola set in the ceiling for this purpose, where they were anaesthetised before the grab was

released. This was done with a long, extremely strong needle which was inserted at the point where the inner side of the foreleg joined the trunk – one of the very few soft spots on the FROB's body.

"...I expect you to break a lot of needles before you get the hang of it," Conway added, "but don't worry about that, or think that you are hurting them. These little darlings are so tough that if a bomb went off beside them they would hardly blink."

Conway was silent for a few seconds while they walked briskly towards the FROB ward – Prilicla's six, multi-jointed and pencil-thin legs seeming to spread out all over the place, but somehow never actually getting underfoot. He no longer felt that he was walking on eggs when he was near the GLNO, or that the other would crumple up and blow away if he so much as

brushed against it. Prilicla had demonstrated its ability to avoid all contacts likely to be physically harmful to it in a way which, now that Conway was becoming accustomed to it, was both dexterous and strangely graceful.

A man, he thought, could get used to working with anything.

"But to get back to our thick-skinned little friends," Conway resumed, "Physical toughness in that species – especially in the younger age groups – is not accompanied by resistance to germ or virus infections. Later they develop the necessary antibodies and as adults are disgustingly healthy, but in the infant stage..."

"They catch everything," Prilicla put in. "And as soon as a new disease is

discovered they get that, too."

Conway laughed. "I was forgetting that most E-T hospitals have their quota of FROBs and that you may already have had experience with them. You will know also that these diseases are rarely fatal to the infants, but that their cure is long, complicated, and not very rewarding, because they straight-away catch something else. None of our twenty-eight cases here are serious, and the reason that they are here rather than at a local hospital is that we are trying to produce a sort of shotgun serum which will artificially induce in them the immunity to infection which will eventually be theirs in later life and so... Stop!"

The word was sharp, low and urgent, a shouted whisper. Prilicla froze, its sucker-tipped legs gripping the corridor floor, and

stared along with Conway at the being who had just appeared at the intersection ahead of them.

At first glance it looked like an Illensan. The shapeless, spiny body with the dry, rustling membrane joining upper and lower appendages belonged unmistakably to the PVSJ chlorine-breathers. But there were two eating tentacles which seemed to have been transplanted from an FGLI, a furry breast pad which was pure DBLF and it was breathing, as they were, an atmosphere rich in oxygen.

It could only be the runaway.

All the laws of physiology to the contrary Conway felt his heart battering at the back of his throat somewhere as, remembering O'Mara's strict orders not to frighten the

being, he tried to think of something friendly and reassuring to say. But the SRTT took off immediately it caught sign of them, and all Conway could find to say was, "Quick, after it!"

At a dead run they reached the intersection and turned into the corridor taken by the fleeing SRTT, Prilicla scuttling along the ceiling again to keep out of the way of Conway's pounding feet. But the sight in front of them caused Conway to forget all about being gentle and reassuring, and he yelled, "Stop, you fool! Don't go in there... 1"

The runaway was at the entrance to the FROB ward.

They reached the entry lock just too late and watched helplessly through the port as the SRTT opened the inner seal and,

gripped by the four times normal gravity pull of the ward, was flung down out of sight. The inner door closed automatically then, allowing Prilicla and Conway to enter the lock and prepare for the environment within the ward.

Conway struggled frantically into the heavy duty suit which he kept in the lock chamber and quickly set the repulsion of its anti-gravity belt to compensate for the conditions inside. Prilicla, meanwhile, was doing similar things to its own equipment. While checking the seals and fastenings of the suit, and swearing at this very necessary waste of time, Conway could see through the inner inspection window a sight which made him shudder.

The psuedo-Illensan shape of the SRTT lay plastered against the floor. It was twitching slightly, and already one of the

larger FROB infants was coming pounding up to investigate this odd-looking object. One of the great, spatulate feet must have trod on the recumbent SRTT, because it jerked away and began rapidly and incredibly to *change*. The weak, membranous appendages of the PVSJ seemed to dissolve into the main body which became the bony, lizard-like form with the wicked, horn-tipped tentacles which they had seen first at Lock Six. This was obviously the SRTT's most frightening manifestation.

But the infant FROB possessed nearly five times the other's mass and so could hardly be expected to be frightened. It put down its massive head and butted, sending the SRTT crashing against the wall plating twenty feet across the ward. The FROB wanted to play.

Both doctors were out of the lock and onto the ceiling catwalk now, where the view was much clearer. The SRTT was changing again, fast. The tentacled lizard shape had not worked at all well for it in four-G conditions against these infant behemoths and it was trying something else.

The FROB had closed in on it again and was watching fascinated.

Chapter Five

Conway said urgently, "Doctor, can you handle the grab apparatus? Good! Then go to it..." As Prilicla scurried along the catwalk to the control cupola Conway set his anti-gravity controls to zero and called, "I'll direct you from below." Weightless now, he kicked himself towards the floor.

But Conway was no stranger to the FROB infant — very probably it disliked or was bored by this diminutive figure whose only game was that of sticking big needles in it while something big and strong held it still,

and despite all of Conway's frantic shouting and arm-waving he found himself being ignored. But other occupants of the ward were taking an interest, and their attention was being drawn to the still-changing SRTT

"No!" Conway shouted, aghast at what the visitor was changing into. "No! Stop! Change back... I"

But it was too late. The whole ward seemed to be stampeding towards the SRTT, giving vent to a thunderous bedlam of excited growls and yelps which, from the older infants, were Translated into shouts of "Dolly! Dolly! Nice dolly...!"

Springing upwards to avoid being trampled, Conway looked down on the milling mass of FROBSs and felt the strong

and sickening conviction that the luckless SRTT had departed this life. But no. The being had somehow managed to run – or squeeze – the gauntlet of stamping feet and eager, bludgeoning heads by keeping low and tightly pressed against the wall. It emerged battered but still in the shape which it had, chameleon-like, adopted in the mistaken idea that a tiny version of an FROB would be safe.

Conway called, "Quickly! Grab!"

But Prilicla was not sleeping on its job. The massive jaws of the grab were already hanging open above the dazed and slow-moving SRTT, and as Conway shouted they dropped and crashed shut. Conway sprang for one of the lifting cables and as they rose from the floor together he said hurriedly, "You're safe now. Relax. I'm here to help you..."

His reply was a sharp convulsion of the SRTT which nearly shook him loose, and suddenly the being had become a thing of lithe, oily convolutions which slipped between the fingers of the grab and slapped onto the floor. The FROBs hooted excitedly and charged again.

It could not possibly survive this time, Conway thought with a mixture of horror, pity and impatience; this being who had had one fright on arrival and who had not stopped running since, and who was still too utterly terrified even to be helped. The grab was useless but there was one other possibility. O'Mara would probably skin him alive for it, but he would at least be saving SRTT's life for the time being if he allowed it to escape.

On the wall opposite the entry lock which

Prilicla and himself had used was the door through which the FROB patients were brought to the ward. It was a simple door because the corridor outside it, which led to the FROB operating theatre, was maintained at the same level of gravity and pressure as was the ward. Conway dived across the intervening space to the controls and slid it open, watching the SRTT – who was not so insensible with fear that it missed seeing this way of escape – as it slithered through. He closed it again just in time to prevent some of the patients from getting out as well, then made for the control cupola to report the whole ghastly mess to O'Mara.

For the situation was now much worse than they all had thought. While he had been at the other end of the ward he had seen something which increased the difficulties of catching and pacifying the runaway

many, many times, and which explained the visitor's lack of response to him while in the grab. It had been the shattered, trampled ruin of the SRTT's translator pack.

Conway's hand was on the intercom switch when Prilicla said, "Excuse me, sir, but does my ability to detect your emotions cause you mental distress? Or does mentioning aloud what I may have found trouble you?"

"Eh? What?" said Conway. He thought that he must be radiating impatience at a furious rate at the moment, because his assistant had picked a great time to start asking questions like *that!* His first impulse was to cut the other off, but then he decided that delaying his report to O'Mara by a few seconds would not make any difference, and possibly Prilicla considered

the matter important. Aliens were funny. "No to both questions," Conway replied shortly. "Though in the second instance I might be embarrassed if you made known your findings to a third party in certain circumstances. Why do you ask?"

"Because I have been aware of your deep anxiety regarding the possible depredations of this SRTT among your patients," Prilicla said, "and I am loath to further increase that anxiety by telling you of the type and intensity of the emotions which I detected just now in the being's mind."

Conway sighed. "Spit it out, things couldn't be much worse than they are now..."

But they could and were.

When Prilicla finished speaking Conway pulled his hand away from the intercom switch as though it had grown teeth and bit him. "I can't tell him *that* over the intercom!" he burst out. "It would be sure to leak to the patients and if they, or even some of the Staff knew about it, there would be a panic." He dithered wildly for a moment, then cried, "Come on, we've got to see O'Mara!"

But the Chief Psychologist was not in his office or in the nearby Educator room. However, information supplied by one of his assistants sent them hurrying to the forty-seventh level and Observation Ward Three.

This was a vast, high-ceilinged room maintained at a pressure and temperature suited to warm-blooded oxygen-breathers. DBDG, DBLF and FGFI doctors carried out

preliminary examinations here on the more puzzling or exotic cases – the patients, if these atmospheric conditions did not suit them, being housed in large, transparent cubicles spaced at intervals around the walls and floor. It was known irreverently as the Punch and Ponder department and Conway, could see a group of medics of all shapes and species gathered around a glass-walled tank in the middle of the ward. This must be the older and dying SRTT he had heard about, but he had no attention to spare for anything until he had spoken to O'Mara.

He caught sight of the psychologist at a communications desk beside the wall and hurried over.

While he talked O'Mara listened stolidly, several times opening his mouth as though to interrupt, then each time closing it in a

grimmer, tighter line. But when Conway reached the point where he had seen the broken Translator, O'Mara waved him to silence and hit the intercom switch with the same jerky motion of his hand.

"Get me Engineering Division, Colonel Skempton," he barked. Then: "Colonel, our runaway is in the FROB nursery area. But there is a complication, I'm afraid – it has lost its Translator..." There was a short pause, then: "Neither do I know how I expect you to pacify it when you can't communicate, but do what you can in the meantime – I'm going to work on the communication angle now."

He snapped the switch off and then on again, and said, "Colinson, in Communications... hello, Major. I want a relay between here and the Monitor Survey team on the SRTT's home planet – yes,

the one I had you collecting about a few hours ago. Will you arrange that. And have them prepare a sound tape in the SRTT native language – I'll give you the wording I want in a moment – and have them relay it here. The substance of the speech, which must be obtained from an adult SRTT, will have to be roughly as follows – "

He broke off as Major Colinson's voice erupted from the speaker. The communications man was reminding a certain desk-bound head-shrinker that the SRTT planet was half way across the Galaxy, that sub-space radio was susceptible to interference just like any other kind and that by the time every sun in the intervening distance had splattered the signal with their share of static it would be virtually unintelligible.

"Have them repeat the signal," O'Mara

said. "There are sure to be usable words and phrases which we can piece together to reconstruct the original message. We need this thing badly, and I'll tell you why..."

The SRTT species were an extremely long-lived race, O'Mara explained quickly, who reproduced hermaphroditically at very great intervals and with great pain and effort. There was therefore a bond of great affection and – what was more important in the present circumstances – discipline between the adults and children of the species. There was also the belief, so strong as to be almost a certainty, that no matter what changes a member of this species worked it would always try to retain the vocal and aural organs which allowed it to communicate with its fellows.

Now if one of the adults on the home

planet could prepare a few general remarks directed towards youths who misbehaved when they ought to have known better, and these were relayed to Sector General and in turn played over the PA to their runaway visitor, then the young SRTT's ingrained obedience to its elders would do the rest.

"...And that," said O'Mara to Conway as he switched off, "should take care of that little crisis. With any luck we'll have our visitor quieted down within a few hours. So your troubles are over, you can relax..."

The psychologist broke off at the expression on Conway's face, then he said softly, "There's more?"

Conway nodded. Indicating his assistant he said, "Dr. Prilicla detected it, by empathy. You must understand that the

runaway is in a very bad way psychologically – grief for its dying parent, the fright it received at Lock Six when everyone came charging at it, and now the mauling it has undergone in the FROB nursery. It is young, immature, and these experiences have thrown it back to the stage where its responses are purely animal and... well..." Conway licked dry lips. "...has anyone calculated how long it has been since that SRTT has eaten?"

The implications of the question were not lost on O'Mara either. He paled suddenly and snatched up the mike again. "Get me Skempton again, quickly!... Skempton?... Colonel, I am not trying to sound melodramatic but would you use the scrambler attached to your set, there is another complication..."

Turning away, Conway debated with

himself whether to go over for a brief look at the dying SRTT or hurry back to his section. Back in the FROB nursery Prilicla had detected in the runaway's mind strong hunger radiation as well as the expected fear and confusion, and it had been the communication of these findings which had caused first Conway, then O'Mara and Skempton to realise just what a deadly menace — the visitor had become. The youths of any species are notoriously selfish, cruel and uncivilised, Conway knew, and driven by steadily increasing pangs of hunger this one would certainly turn cannibal. In its present confused mental state the young SRTT would probably not know that it had done so, but that fact would make no difference at all to the patients concerned.

If only the majority of Conway's charges were not so small, defenceless and... tasty.

On the other hand a look at the elder being might suggest some method of dealing with the younger – his curiosity regarding the SRTT terminal case having nothing to do with it, of course...

He was manoeuvring for a closer look at the patient inside the tank and at the same time trying not to jostle the Earth-human doctor who was blocking his view, when the man turned irritably and asked, "Why the blazes don't you climb up my back? Oh, hello Conway. Here to contribute another uniformed wild guess, I suppose?"

It was Mannon, the doctor who had at one time been Conway's superior and was now a Senior Physician well on the way to achieving Diagnostician status. He had befriended Conway on his arrival at the hospital, Mannon had several times

explained within Conway's hearing, because he had a soft spot for stray dogs, cats and interns. Currently he was allowed to retain permanently in his brain just three Educator tapes – that of a Tralthan specialist in micro-surgery and two belonging to surgeons of the low-gravity LSVO and MSVK species – so that for long periods of each day his reactions were quite human. At the moment he was eyeing Prilicla, who was skittering about on the fringe of the crowd, with raised eyebrows.

Conway began to give details regarding the character and accomplishments of his new assistant, but was interrupted by Mannon saying loudly, "That's enough, lad, you're beginning to sound like an unsolicited testimonial. A light touch and the emphatic faculty will be a big help in your current line of work. I grant that. But then you always did pick odd associates;

levitating balls of goo, insects, dinosaurs, and such like – all pretty peculiar people, you must admit. Except for that nurse on the twenty-third level, now I admire your taste there – "

"Are they making any headway with this case, sir?" Conway said, determinedly shunting the conversation back onto the main track again. Mannon was the best in the world, but he had the painful habit sometimes of pulling a person's leg until it threatened to come off at the hip.

"None," said Mannon. "And what I said about wild guesses is a fact. We're all making them here, and getting nowhere – ordinary diagnostic techniques are completely useless. Just look at the thing!"

Mannon moved aside for Conway, and a sensation as of a pencil being laid across

his shoulder told him that Prilicla was behind him craning to see, too.

Chapter Six

The being in the tank was indescribable for the simple reason that it had obviously been trying to become several different things at once when the dissolution had begun. There were appendages both jointed and tentacular, patches of scales, spines and leathery, wrinkled tegument together with the suggestion of mouth and gill openings, all thrown together in a gruesome hodge-podge. Yet none of the physiological details were clear because the whole flaccid mass was softened, eroded away, like a wax model left too long in the heat. Moisture oozed from the

patient's body continuously and trickled to the floor of the tank, where the water level was nearly six inches deep.

Conway swallowed and said, "Bearing in mind the adaptability of this species, its immunity to physical damage and so on, and considering the wildly mixed-up state of its body, I should say that there may be a strong possibility that the trouble stems from psychological causes."

Mannon looked him up and down slowly with an expression of awe on his face, then said witheringly, "Psychological causes, hey? Amazing! Well, what else *could* cause a being who is immune both to physical damage and bacterial infection to get into this state except something wrong with its think tank? But perhaps you were going to be more specific?"

Conway felt his neck and ears getting warm. He said nothing.

Mannon grunted, then went on, "The water that it is melting into is just that, plus a few harmless organisms which are suspended in it. We've tried every method of physical and psychological treatment that we could think of, without results. At the moment someone is suggesting that we quick-freeze the patient, both to halt the melting and to give us more time to think of something else. This has been vetoed because in its present state such a course might kill the patient outright. We've had a couple of our telepathic life-forms try to tune to its mind with a view to straightening it out that way, and O'Mara has gone back to the dark ages to such a point that he has tried crude electro-shock therapy, but nothing works. Altogether we have brought, singly and acting in concert, the

viewpoints of very nearly every species in the Galaxy, and still we can't get a line on what ails it..."

"If the trouble was psychological," put in Conway, "I should have thought that the telepaths – "

"No," said Marmon. "In this life-form the mind and memory function is evenly distributed throughout the whole body and not housed in a permanent brain casing, otherwise it could not accomplish such marked changes in its physical structure. At present the being's mind is withdrawing, draining away, into smaller and smaller units – so small that the telepaths cannot work them."

"This SRTT it a real weirdie," Mannon continued thoughtfully. "It evolved out of the sea, of course, but later its world saw

outbreaks of volcanic activity, earth-quakes – the surface being coated with sulphur and who knows what else – and finally a minor instability in their sun converted the planet into the desert which it now is. They had to be adaptable to survive all that. And their method of reproduction – a budding and splitting-off process which causes the loss of a sizable portion of the parent's mass – is interesting, too, because it means that the embryo is born with part of the body-and-brain cell structure of the parent. No conscious memories are passed to the newly-born but it retains unconsciously the memories which enable it to adapt – "

"But that means," Conway burst out, "that if the parent transfers a section of its body-and-mind to the off-spring, then each individual's unconscious memory must go back – "

"And it is the unconscious which is the seat of all psychoses" interrupted O'Mara, who had come up behind them at that point. "Don't say any more, I have nightmares at the very idea. Imagine trying to analyse a patient whose subconscious mind goes back fifty-thousand years...!"

The conversation dried up quickly after that and Conway, still anxious about the younger SRTT's activities, hurried back to the nursery section. The whole area was infested with Maintenance-men and green-uniformed Monitors, but the runaway had not been sighted again. Conway placed a DBDG nurse – the one Mannon was so fond of pulling his leg about, strangely enough – on duty in a diving suit at the AUGL ward, because he was expecting developments there at any time, and prepared with Prilicla to pay a call on the

methane nursery.

Their work among the frigid-blooded beings in that ward was also routine, and during it Conway pestered Prilicla with questions about the emotional state of the elder SRTT they had just left. But the GLNO was very little help; all it would say was that it had detected an urge towards dissolution which it could not describe more fully to Conway because there was nothing in its own previous experience which it could relate the feeling to.

Outside again they discovered that Colinson had wasted no time. From the wall annunciators there poured out a staccato howl of static through which could be dimly heard an alien gobbling which was presumably the SRTT sound tape. Conway thought that if positions were reversed and he was a frightened small

boy listening to a voice striving to speak to him through that incredible uproar, he would feel anything but reassured. And the atmosphere of the SRTT's home planet would almost certainly be of a different density to this one, which would further increase the distortion of the voice. He did not say anything to Prilicla, but Conway thought that it would be nothing less than a miracle if this cacophony produced the result which O'Mara had intended.

The racket cut off suddenly, was replaced by a voice in English which droned out, "Would Dr. Conway please go to the intercom," then it returned unabated. Conway hurried to the nearest set.

"This is Murchison in the AUGL lock, Doctor," said a worried female voice. "Somebody — I mean something — just went past me into the main ward. I thought

it was you at first until it began opening the inner seal without putting on a suit, then I knew it must be the runaway SRTT." She hesitated, then said, "Considering the state of the patients inside I didn't give the alarm until checking with you, but I can call – "

"No, you did quite right, Nurse," Conway said quickly. "We'll be down at once."

When they arrived at the lock five minutes later, the nurse had a suit ready for Conway, and the combination of physiological features which made it impossible for the Earth human members of the Staff to regard Murchison with anything like a clinical detachment were rendered slightly less distracting by her own protective suit. But Conway had eyes at the moment only for the inner inspection window and the thing which floated just inside it.

It was, or had been, very like Conway. The hair colouring was right, also the complexion, and it was in whites. But the features were out of proportion and ran together in a way that was quite horrible, and the neck and hands did not go into the tunic, they *became* the collar and sleeves of the garment. Conway was reminded of a lead figure that had been crudely fashioned and carelessly painted.

At the moment Conway knew that it was not a threat to the lives of the ward's tiny patients, but it was changing. There was a slow growing together of the arms and legs, a lengthening out and the sprouting of long, narrow protuberances which could only be the beginnings of fins. The AUGL patients might be difficult for a Earth-human DBDG to catch, but the SRTT was adapting to water also, and speed.

"Inside!" said Conway urgently. "We've got to herd it out of here before it – "

But Prilicla was making no attempt to begin the bodily contortions which would bring it inside its protective envelope. "I have detected an interesting change in the quality of its emotional radiation," the GLNO said suddenly. "There is still fear and confusion present, and an overriding hunger..."

"Hunger...!" Murchison had not realised until then just what deadly danger the patients were in.

"But there is something else," Prilicla continued, disregarding the interruption. "I can only describe it as a background pleasure sensation coupled with that same urge towards dissolution which I detected a

short time ago in its parent. But I am puzzled to account for this sudden change."

Conway's mind was on his three tiny patients, and the predatory form the SRTT was beginning to take. He said impatiently, "Probably because recent events have affected its sanity also, the pleasure trace being due possibly to a liking for the water-"

Abruptly he stopped, his mind racing too fast for words or even ordered logical thought. Rather it was a feverish jumble of facts, experiences and wild guesswork which boiled chaotically through his brain, then incredibly became still and cool and very, very clear as... the answer.

And yet none of the tremendous intellects

in the observation ward could have found it, Conway was sure, because they were not present with an empathic assistant when a young SRTT close to insanity through fear and grief had been immersed suddenly in the tepid, yellow depths of the AUGL tank...

When an intelligent, mature and mentally complex being encounters unpleasant and hurtful facts of sufficient numbers and severity the result is a retreat from reality. First a striving to return to the simple, unworrisome days of childhood and then, when that period turns out to be not nearly so carefree and uncomplicated as remembered, the ultimate retreat into the womb and the motionless, mindless condition of the catatonic. But to a mature SRTT the foetal position of catatonia could not be simple to attain, because its reproductive system was such that instead

of the unborn off-spring being in a state of warm, mindless comfort, it found itself part of its parent's mature adult body and called upon to share in the decisions and adjustments its parent had to make. Because the SRTT body, every single cell of it, was the mind and any sort of separation was impossible to a life-form whose every cell was interchangeable.

How divide a glass of water without pouring some off into another container?

The diseased intellect would be forced to retreat again and again, only to find that it had become involved in endless changes and adaptations in its efforts to return to this non-existent womb. It would go back — far, far back — until it eventually did find the mindless state which it craved and its mind, which was inseparable from its body, became the warm water teeming with

unicellular life from which it had originally evolved.

Now Conway knew the reason for the slow, melting dissolution of the terminal case upstairs. More, he thought he saw a way of solving the whole horrible mess. If he could only bank on the fact that, as was the case with most other species, a complex, mature mind tended to go insane faster than an undeveloped and youthful one...

He was only vaguely aware of going to the intercom again and calling O'Mara, and of Murchison and Prilicla drawing closer to him as he talked. Then he was waiting for what seemed like hours for the Chief Psychologist to absorb the information and react. Finally: "An ingenious theory, Doctor," said O'Mara warmly. "More than that I would say that that is exactly what has happened here, and no theorising

about it. The only pity is that understanding what has happened does nothing to aid the patient – "

"I've been thinking about that, too," Conway broke in eagerly, "and the way I see it the runaway is the most urgent problem now – if it isn't caught and pacified soon there are going to be serious casualties among the Staff and patients, in my section anyway, if nowhere else. Unfortunately, for technical reasons, your idea of calming it by means of a sound tape in its own language is not very successful up to now..."

"That's putting it kindly," said O'Mara drily.

"...But," went on Conway, "if this idea was modified so that the runaway was spoken to, reassured, by its parent

upstairs. If we first cured the elder SRTT -"

"Cured the elder! What the blazes do you think we've been trying to do this past three weeks?" O'Mara demanded angrily. Then as the realisation came that Conway was not trying to be funny or wilfully stupid, that he sounded in deadly earnest, he said flatly, "Keep talking, Doctor."

Conway kept talking. When he had finished the intercom speaker registered the sound of a great, explosive sigh, then; "I think you've got the answer all right, and we've certainly got to try it despite the risks you mentioned," O'Mara said excitedly. Then abruptly his tones became clipped and efficient. "Take charge down there, Doctor. You know what you want done better than anyone else does. And use the DBLF recreation room on level fifty-nine — it's close to your section and can be evacuated

quickly. We're going to tap in on the existing communications circuits so there will be no delay here, and the special equipment you want will be in the DBLF recreation room inside fifteen minutes. So you can start anytime, Conway..."

Before he was cut off he heard O'Mara begin issuing instructions to the effect that all Monitor Corps personnel and Staff in the nursery section were to be placed at the disposal of Doctors Conway and Prilicla, and he had barely turned away from the set before green-uniformed Monitors began crowding into the lock.

Chapter Seven

The SRTT youth had somehow to be forced into the DBLF recreation room which was rapidly being booby-trapped for its benefit, and the first step was to get it out of the AUGL ward. This was accomplished by twelve Monitors swimming, sweating and cursing furiously in their heavy issue suits who chased awkwardly after it until they had it hemmed in at the point where the entry lock gave it the only avenue of escape.

Conway, Prilicla and another bunch of

Monitors were waiting in the corridor outside when it came through, all garbed against any one of half a dozen environments through which the chase might lead them. Murchison had wanted to go, too – she had wanted to be in at the kill, she had stated – but Conway had told her sharply that her job was watching over the three AUGL patients and that she had better do just that.

He had not meant to lose his temper with Murchison like that, but he was on edge. If the idea he had been so enthusiastic about to O'Mara did not pan out there was a very good chance that there would be two incurable SRTT patients instead of one, and 'In at the kill' had been an unfortunate choice of words.

The runaway had changed again – a semi-involuntary defence mechanism triggered

off by the shapes of its pursuers – into a vaguely Earth-human form. It ran soggily along the corridor on legs which were too rubbery and which bent in the wrong places, and the scaly, dun-coloured tegument it had worn in the AUGL tank was twitching and writhing and smoothing out into the pink and white of flesh and medical tunic. Conway could look on the most alien beings imaginable suffering from the most horrible maladies without inward distress, but the sight of the SRTT trying to become a human being as it ran made him fight to retain his lunch.

A sudden sideways dash into an MSVK corridor took them unawares and resulted in a kicking, floundering pileup of pursuers beyond the inner seal of the connecting lock. The MSVK life-form were tri-pedal, vaguely stork-like beings who required an extremely low gravity pull, and the DBDGs

like Conway could not adjust to it immediately. But while Conway was still slowly falling all over the place the Monitors' space training enabled them to find their feet quickly. The SRTT was headed off into the oxygen section again.

It had been a bad few minutes while it lasted, Conway thought with relief, because the dim lighting and the opacity of the fog which the MSVKs' called an atmosphere would have made the SRTT difficult to find if it had been lost to sight. If that had happened at this stage... Well, Conway preferred not to think about that.

But the DBLF recreation room was only minutes away now, and the SRTT was heading straight for it. The being was changing again, into something low and heavy which moving on all fours. It seemed to be drawing itself in, condensing, and

there was a suggestion of a carapace forming. It was still in that condition when two Monitors, yelling and waving their arms wildly, dashed suddenly out of an intersection and stampeded it into the corridor which contained the recreation room...

... And found it empty!

Conway swore luridly. There should have been half a dozen monitors strung across that corridor to bar its way, but he had made such good time getting here that they were not in position yet. They were probably still inside the rec room placing their equipment, and the SRTT would go right past the doorway.

But he had not counted on the quick mind and even more agile body of Prilicla. His

assistant must have realised the position in the same instant that he did. The little GLNO ran clicking down the corridor, rapidly overtaking the SRTT, then swinging up onto the ceiling until it had passed the runaway before dropping back. Conway tried to yell a warning, tried to shout that a fragile GLNO had no chance of heading off a being who was now the characteristics of an outsize and highly mobile armoured crab, and that Prilicla was committing suicide. Then he saw what his assistant was aiming at.

There was a powered stretcher-carrier in its alcove about thirty feet ahead of the fleeing SRTT. He saw Prilicla skid to a halt beside it, hit the starter, then charge on. Prilicla was not being stupidly brave, it was being brainy and fast which was much better in these circumstances.

The stretcher-carrier, uncontrolled, lurched into motion and went wobbling across the corridor – right into the path of the charging SRTT. There was a metallic crash and a burst of dense yellow and black smoke as its heavy batteries shattered and shorted across. Before the fans could quite clear the air the Corpsmen were able to work around the stunned and nearly motionless runaway and herd it into the recreation room.

A few minutes later a Monitor officer approached Conway. He gave a jerk of his head which indicated the weird assortment of gadgetry which had been rushed to the compartment only minutes ago and which lay in neat piles around the room, and included the green-clad men ranged solidly against the walls – all facing towards the centre of the big compartment where the SRTT rotated slowly in the exact centre of

the floor, seeking a way of escape. Quite obviously he was eaten up with curiosity, but his tone was carefully casual as he said, "Dr. Conway, I believe? Well, Doctor, what do you want us to do now?"

Conway moistened his lips. Up to now he had not thought much about this moment — he had thought that it would be easy to do this because the young SRTT had been such a menace to the hospital in general and caused so much trouble in his own section in particular. But now he was beginning to feel sorry for it. It was, after all, only a kid who had been sent out of control by a combination of grief, ignorance and panic. If this thing did not turn out right...

He shook off the feelings of doubt and inadequacy and said harshly, "You see that beastie in the middle of the room. I want it

scared to death."

He had to elaborate, of course, but the Monitors got the idea very quickly and began using the equipment which had been sent them with great fervour and enthusiasm. Watching grimly, Conway identified items from Air Supply, Communications and the various diet kitchens, all being used for a purpose for which they had never been designed. There were things which emitted shrill whistles, siren howls of tremendous volumes and others which consisted simply of banging two metal trays together. To this fearful racket was added the whoops of the men wielding those noise-makers.

And there was no doubt that the SRTT was scared — Prilicla reported its emotional reactions constantly. But it was not scared enough.

"Quiet!" yelled Conway suddenly. "Start using the silent stuff!"

The preceding din had only been a primer. Now would come the really vicious stuff — but silent, because any noise made by the SRTT had to be heard.

Flares burst around the shaking figure in the middle of the floor, blindingly incandescent but of negligible heat. Simultaneously tractor and pressor beams pushed and pulled at it, sliding it back and forth across the floor, occasionally tossing it into mid-air or flattening it against the ceiling. The beams worked on the same principle as the gravity neutraliser belts, but were capable of much finer control and focus. Other beam operators began flinging lighted flares at the suspended, wildly struggling figure, only yanking them

back or turning them aside at the last possible moment.

The SRTT was really frightened now, so frightened that even non-empaths could feel it. The shapes it was taking were going to give Conway nightmares for many weeks to come.

Conway lifted a hand-mike to his lips and flicked the switch. "Any reaction up there yet?"

"Nothing yet," O'Mara's voice boomed from the speakers which had been set up around the room. "Whatever you're doing at the moment you'll have to step it up."

"But the being is in a condition of extreme distress..." began Prilicla.

Conway rounded on his assistant. "If you can't take it, leave!" he snapped.

"Steady, Conway," O'Mara's voice came sharply. "I know how you must feel, but remember that the end result will cancel all this out..."

"But if it doesn't work," Conway protested, then: "Oh, never mind." To Prilicla he said, "I'm sorry." To the officer beside him he asked, "Can you think of any way of putting on more pressure?"

"I'd hate anything like that being done to me," said the Monitor tightly, "but I would suggest adding spin. Some species are utterly demoralised by spin when they can take practically anything else..."

Spin was added to the pummelling which the SRTT was already undergoing with the

pressors – not a simple spin, but a wild, rolling, pitching movement which made Conway's stomach feel queasy just by looking at it, and the flares dived and swooped around it like insane moons around their primary. Quite a few of the men had lost their first enthusiasm, and Prilicla swayed and shook on its six pipe-stem legs, in the grip of an emotional gale which threatened to blow it away.

It had been wrong to bring Prilicla in on this, Conway told himself angrily; no empath should have to go through this sort of hell by proxy. He had made a mistake from the very first, because the whole idea was cruel and sadistic and *wrong*. He was worse than a monster...

High in the centre of the room the twisting, spinning blur that was the younger SRTT began to emit a high-pitched and terrified

gobbling noise.

A crashing bedlam erupted from the wall speakers; shouts, cries, breaking noises and the sounds of running feet over-laying that of something slower and infinitely heavier. They could hear O'Mara's voice shouting out some sort of explanation to somebody at the top of his lungs, then an unidentified voice yelled at them, "For Pete's sake stop it down there! Buster's papa has woke up and is wrecking the joint... I"

Quickly but gently they checked the spinning SRTT and lowered it to the floor, then they waited tensely while the shouting and crashing being relayed to them from Observation Ward Three reached a crescendo and began gradually to die down. Around the room men stood motionless watching each other, or the

whimpering being on the floor, or the wall speakers, waiting. And then it came.

The sound was similar to the alien gobbling which had been relayed through the annunciators some hours previously, but without the accompanying roar of static, and because everyone had their Translators switched on the words also came through as English.

It was the elder SRTT, incurable no longer because it was phsychically whole again, speaking both reassuringly and chidingly to its erring off-spring. In effect it was saying that junior had been a bad boy, that he must cease forthwith running around and getting himself and everyone else into a state, and that nothing else unpleasant would happen to him if he did as he was told by the beings now surrounding him. The sooner it did these things, the elder

SRTT ended, the sooner they could both go home.

Mentally, the runaway had taken a terrible beating, Conway knew. Maybe it had taken too much. Tense with anxiety he watched it – still in a shape that was neither fish, flesh or fowl – begin humping its way across the floor. When it began gently and submissively to butt one of the watching Monitors in the knees, the cheer that went up very nearly gave it a relapse.

"When Prilicla here gave me the clue to what was troubling the elder SRTT, I was sure that the cure would have to be drastic," Conway said to the Diagnosticians and Senior Physicians ranged around and behind O'Mara's desk.

The fact that he was seated in such august company was a sure sign of the approval in

which he had held, but despite that he still felt nervous as he went on. "Its regression towards the – to it – foetal state – complete dissolution into individual and unthinking cells floating in the primeval ocean – was far advanced, perhaps too far judging by its physical state. Major O'Mara had already tried various shock treatments which it, with its fantastically adaptable cell structure, was able to negate or ignore. My idea was to use the close physical and emotional bond which I discovered existed between the SRTT adult and its last-born offspring, and get at it that way."

Conway paused, his eyes drifting sideways briefly to take in the shambles around them. Observation Ward Three looked as though a bomb had hit it, and Conway knew that there had been a rather hectic few minutes here between the time the elder SRTT had come out of its catatonic

state and explanations had been given it. He cleared his throat and went on: "So we trapped the young one in the DBLF recreation room and tried to frighten it as much as possible, piping the sounds it made up here to the parent. It worked. The elder SRTT could not lie doing nothing while its latest and most loved off-spring was apparently in frightful danger, and parental concern and affection overcame and destroyed the psychosis and forced it back to present time and reality. It was able to pacify the young one, and so all concerned were left happy."

"A nice piece of deductive reasoning on your part, Doctor," O'Mara said warmly. "You are to be commended..."

At that moment the intercom interrupted him. It was Murchison reporting that the three AUGLs were showing the first signs

of stiffening up, and would he come at once. Conway requested an AUGL tape for Prilicla and himself, and explained the urgency of the matter. While they were taking them the Diagnosticians and Senior Physicians began to leave. A little disappointedly Conway thought that Murchison's call had spoiled what might have been his greatest moment.

"Don't worry about it, Doctor," O'Mara said cheerfully, reading his mind again. "If that call had come five minutes later your head would have been too swollen to take a physiology tape..."

Two days later Conway had his first and only disagreement with Dr. Prilicla. He insisted that without the aid of Prilicla's empathic faculty – an incredibly accurate and useful diagnostic tool – and Murchison's vigilance, the cure of all three

AUGLS would not have been possible. The GLNO stated that, much as it was against its nature to oppose his superior's wishes, on this occasion Dr. Conway was completely mistaken. Murchison said that she was glad that she had been able to help, and could she please have some leave?

Conway said yes, then continued the argument with Prilicla, even though he knew he had no hope of winning it.

Conway honestly *knew* that he would not have been able to save the infant AUGLS without the little empath's help – he might not have saved any of them, in fact. But he was the Boss, and when a Boss and his assistants accomplish something the credit invariably goes to the Boss.

The argument, if that was the proper word for such an essentially friendly disagreement, raged for days. Things were going well in the Nursery and they hadn't anything of a serious nature to think about. They were not aware of the wreck which was then on its way to the hospital, or of the survivor it contained.

Nor did Conway know that within the next two weeks, the whole Staff of the hospital would be despising him.

Part Five

Out-Patient

THE MONITOR CORPS cruiser *Sheldon* flicked into normal space some five hundred miles from Sector Twelve General Hospital, the wreck which was its reason for coming held gently against the hull within the field of its hyperdrive generators. At this distance the vast, brilliantly lit structure which floated in interstellar space at the galactic rim was only a dim blur of light, but that was because the Monitor Captain had had a close decision to make. Buried somewhere inside the wreck which he had brought in was a survivor urgently in need of medical attention. But like any good policeman his actions were constrained by possible effects on innocent bystanders – in this case the Staff and patients of the Galaxy's largest multi-environment hospital.

Hurriedly contacting Reception he explained the situation, and received their reassurances that the matter would be taken care of at once. Now that the welfare of the survivor was in competent hands, the Captain decided that he could return with a clear conscience to his examination of the wreck, which just might blow up in his face at any moment.

In the office of the hospital's Chief Psychologist, Dr. Conway sat uneasily on a very easy chair and watched the square, craggy features of O'Mara across an expanse of cluttered desk.

"Relax, Doctor," O'Mara said suddenly, obviously reading his thoughts. "If you were here for a carpeting I'd have given you a harder chair. On the contrary, I've been instructed to administer a hefty pat on

the back. You've been up-graded, Doctor. Congratulations. You are now, Heaven help us all, a Senior Physician."

Before Conway could react to the news, the psychologist held up a large, square hand.

"In my own opinion a ghastly mistake has been made," he went on, "but seemingly your success with that dissolving SRTT and your part in the levitating dinosaur business has impressed the people upstairs – they think it was due to ability instead of sheer luck. As for me," he ended, grinning, "I wouldn't trust you with my appendix."

"You're too kind, sir," said Conway drily.

O'Mara smiled again. "What do you expect, praise? My job is to shrink heads, not swell

'em. And now I suppose I'll have to give you a minute to adjust to your new glory..."

Conway was not slow in appreciating what this advance in status was going to mean to him. It pleased him, definitely — he had expected to do another two years before making Senior Physician. But he was a little frightened, too.

Henceforth he would wear an arm-band trimmed with red, have the right-of-way in corridors and dining halls over everyone other than fellow Seniors and Diagnosticians, and all the equipment or assistance he might need would be his for the asking. He would bear full responsibility for any patient left in his charge, with no possibility of ducking it or passing the buck. His personal freedom would be more constrained. He would have to lecture nurses, train junior interns, and almost

certainly take part in one of the long-term research programmes. These duties would necessitate his being in permanent possession of at least one physiology tape, probably two. *That* side of it, he knew, was not going to be pleasant.

Senior Physicians with permanent teaching duties were called on to retain one or two of these tapes continuously. That, Conway had heard, was no fun. The only thing which could be said for it was that he would be better off than a Diagnostician, the hospital's *elite*, one of the rare beings whose mind was considered stable enough to retain permanently six, seven or even ten Educator tapes simultaneously. To their data-crammed minds were given the job of original research in xenobological medicine, and the diagnosis and treatment of new diseases in the hitherto unknown life-forms.

There was a well-known saying in the hospital, reputed to have originated with the Chief Psychologist himself, that anyone sane enough to want to be a Diagnostician was mad.

For it was not only physiological data which the Educator tapes imparted, but the complete memory and personality of the entity who had possessed that knowledge was impressed on their brains as well. In effect, a Diagnostician subjected himself or itself voluntarily to the most drastic form of multiple schizophrenia...

Suddenly O'Mara's voice broke in on his thoughts. "...And now that you feel three feet taller and are no doubt rarin' to go," the psychologist said, "I have a job for you. A wreck has been brought in which contains a survivor. Apparently the usual

procedures for extricating it cannot be used. Physiological classification unknown – we haven't been able to identify the ship so have no idea what it eats, breathes or looks like. I want you to go over there and sort things out, with a view to transferring the being here as quickly as possible for treatment. We're told that its movements inside the wreckage are growing weaker," he ended briskly, "so treat the matter as urgent."

"Yes, sir," said Conway, rising quickly. At the door he paused. Later he was to wonder at his temerity in saying what he did to the Chief Psychologist, and decided that promotion must have gone to his head. As a parting shot he said exultantly, "I've *got* your lousy appendix. Kellerman took it out three years ago. He pickled it and put it up as a chess trophy. It's on my bookcase..."

O'Mara's only reaction was to incline his head, as if receiving a compliment.

Outside in the corridor Conway went to the nearest communicator and called Transport. He said," This is Dr. Conway. I have an urgent out-patient case and need a tender. Also a nurse able to use an analyser and with experience of fishing people out of wrecks, if possible. I'll be at Admission Lock Eight in a few minutes..."

Conway made good time to the lock, all things considered. Once he had to flatten himself against a corridor wall as a Tralthan diagnostician lumbered absently past on its six, elephantine feet, the diminutive and nearly mindless OTSB life-form which lived in symbiosis with it clinging to its leathery back. Conway didn't mind giving way to a Diagnostician, and

the Tralthan FGLI-OTSB combination were the finest surgeons in the Galaxy. Generally, however, the people he encountered — nurses of the DBLF classification mostly, and a few of the low-gravity, bird-like LSVO's — made way for him. Which showed what a very efficient grape-vine the hospital possessed, because he was still wearing his old arm-band.

His swelling head was rapidly shrunk back to size by the entity waiting for him at Lock eight. It was another of the furry, multi-pedal DBLF nurses, and it began hooting and whining immediately he came into sight. The DBLF's own language was unintelligible, but Conway's Translator pack converted the sounds which it made — as it did all the other grunts, chirps and gobblings heard in the hospital — into English.

"I have been awaiting you for over seven minutes," it said. "They told me this was an emergency, yet I find you ambling along as if you had all the time in the world..."

Like all Translated speech the words had been flat and strained free of all emotional content. So the DBLF *could* have been joking, or half joking, or even making a simple statement of fact as it saw them with no disrespect intended. Conway doubted the last very strongly, but knew that losing his temper at this stage would be futile.

He took a deep breath and said, "I might have shortened your waiting period if I had run all the way. But I am against running for the reason that undue haste in a being in my position gives a bad impression — people tend to think I am in a panic over

something and so feel unsure of my capabilities. So for the record," he ended drily, "I wasn't ambling, I was walking with a confident, unhurried tread."

The sound which the DBLF made in reply was not Translatable.

Conway went through the boarding tube ahead of the nurse, and seconds later they shot away from the lock. In the tender's rear vision screen the sprawling mass of lights which was Sector General began to crawl together and shrink, and Conway started worrying.

This was not the first time he had been called to a wreck, and he knew the drill. But suddenly it was brought home to him that he would be solely responsible for what was to happen — he couldn't scream for

help if something went wrong. Not that he had ever done that, but it had been comforting to know that he could have done so if necessary. He had an urgent desire to share some of his newly-acquired responsibility with someone – Dr. Prilicla, for instance, the gentle, spidery, emotion-sensitive who had been his assistant in the Nursery, or any of his other human and non-human colleagues.

During the trip to the wreck the DBLF, who told him that its name was Kursedd, tried Conway's patience sorely. The nurse was completely without tact, and although Conway knew the reason for this failing, it was still a little hard to take.

As a race Kursedd's species were not telepathic, but among themselves they could read each other's thoughts with a high degree of accuracy by the observation

of expression. With four extensible eyes, two hearing antenna, a coat of fur which could lie silky smooth or stick out in spikes like a newly-bathed dog, plus various other highly flexible and expressive features – all of which they had very little control over – it was understandable that this caterpillar-like race had never learned diplomacy. Invariably they said exactly what they thought, because to another member of their race those thoughts were already plain anyhow, so that saying something different would have been stupid.

Then all at once they were sliding up to the Monitor cruiser and the wreck which hung beside it.

Apart from the bright orange colouring it looked pretty much like any other wreck he had seen, Conway thought; ships resembled people in that respect – a

violent end stripped them of all individuality. He directed Kursedd to circle a few times, and moved to the forward observation panel.

At close range the internal structure of the wreck was revealed by the mishap which had practically sheered it in two, it was of dark and fairly normal-looking metal, so that the garish colouration of the hull must be due simply to paint. Conway filed that datum away carefully in his mind, because the shade of paint a being used could give an accurate guide to the range of its visual equipment, and the opacity or otherwise of its atmosphere. A few minutes later he decided that nothing further could be abstracted from an external examination of the ship, and signalled Kursedd to lock on to *Sheldon*. The lock antechamber of the cruiser was small and made even more cramped by the crowd of green-uniformed

Corpsmen staring, discussing and cautiously poking at an odd-looking mechanism — obviously something salvaged from the wreck — which was lying on the deck. The compartment buzzed with the technical jargon of half a dozen specialities and nobody paid any attention to the doctor and nurse until Conway cleared his throat loudly twice. Then an officer with Major's insignia, a thin-faced, greying man, detached himself from the crowd and came towards them.

"Summerfield, Captain," he said crisply, giving the thing on the floor a fond backward glance as he spoke. "You, I take it, will be the high-powered medical types from the hospital?"

Conway felt irritated. He could understand these people's feelings, of course — a wrecked interstellar ship belonging to an

unknown alien culture was a rare find indeed, a technological treasure trove on whose value no limit could be set. But Conways' mind was orientated differently; alien artefacts came a long way second in importance to the study, investigation and eventual restoration of alien life. That was why he got right down to business.

"Captain Summerfield," he said sharply, "we must ascertain and reproduce this survivor's living conditions as quickly as possible, both at the hospital and in the tender which will take it there. Could we have someone to show us over the wreck please. A fairly responsible officer, if possible, with a knowledge of – "

"Surely," Summerfield interrupted. He looked as if he was going to say something else, then he shrugged, turned, and barked, "Hendricks!" A Lieutenant wearing

the bottom half of a spacesuit and a rather harassed expression joined them. The Captain performed brief introductions, then returned to the enigma on the floor.

Hendricks said, "We'll need heavy duty suits. I can fit you Dr. Conway, but Dr. Kursedd is a DBLF..."

"There is no problem," Kursedd put in. "I have a suit in the tender. Give me five minutes."

The nurse wheeled and undulated towards the airlock, its fur rising and falling in slow waves which ran from the sparse hair at its neck to the bushier growth on the tail. Conway had been on the point of correcting Hendrick's mistake regarding Kursedd's status, but he suddenly realised that being called 'Doctor' had elicited an intense emotional response from the DBLF – that

rippling fur was certainly an expression of *something!* Not being a DBLF himself Conway could not tell whether the expression registered was one of pleasure or pride at being mistaken for a Doctor, or if the being was simply laughing one of its thirty-four legs off at the error. It wasn't a vital matter, so Conway decided to say nothing.

Chapter Two

The next occasion that Hendricks addressed 'Doctor' Kutsedd was when they were entering the wreck, but this time the DBLF's expression was hidden by the casing of its spacesuit.

"What happened here?" Conway asked as he looked around curiously. "Accident, collision, or what?"

"Our theory," Lieutenant Hendricks replied, "is that one of the two pairs of generators which maintained the ship in

hyperspace during faster-than-light velocities failed for some reason. One half of the vessel was suddenly returned to normal space, which automatically meant that it was braked to a velocity far below that of light. The result was that the ship was ripped in two. The section containing the faulty generators was left behind," Hendricks went on, "because after the accident the remaining pair of generators must have remained functional for a second or so. Various safety devices must have gone into operation to seal off the damage, but the shock had practically shaken the whole ship to pieces so they weren't very successful. But an automatic distress signal was emitted which we were fortunate enough to hear, and obviously there is still pressure somewhere inside because we heard the survivor moving about. But the thing I can't help wondering about," he ended soberly, "is the condition of the other half of the wreck. It didn't, or

couldn't send out a distress signal or we would have heard it also. Someone might have survived in that section, too."

"A pity if they did," said Conway. Then, in a firmer voice, "But we're going to save this one. How do I get close to it?"

Hendricks checked their suit's anti-gravity belts and air tanks, then said, "You can't, at least not for some time. Follow me and I'll show you why."

O'Mara had made reference to difficulties in reaching the alien, Conway remembered and he had assumed it was the normal trouble of wreckage blocking the way. But from the competent look of this Lieutenant in particular and the known efficiency of the Corps in general, he was sure that their troubles would not be ordinary.

Yet when they penetrated farther into the wreck the ship's interior seemed remarkably clear. There was the usual loose stuff floating about, but no solid blockage. It was only when Conway looked closely at his surroundings that he was able to see the full extent of the damage. There was not one fitting, wall support or section of plating which was not either loose, cracked or sprung at the seams. And at the other end of the compartment they had just entered he could see where a heavy door had been burned through, with traces of the rapid-sealing goo used in setting up a temporary airlock showing all around it.

"That is our problem," Hendricks said, as Conway looked questioningly at him. "The disaster very nearly shook the ship apart. If we weren't in weightless conditions it would fall to pieces around us."

He broke off to go to the aid of Kursedd, who was having trouble getting through the hole in the door, then resumed, "All the airtight doors must be closed automatically, but with the ship in this condition the fact of an airtight door being closed does not necessarily mean that there is pressure on the other side of it. And while we think we have figured out the manual controls, we cannot be absolutely sure that opening one by this method will not cause every other door in the ship to open at the same time, with lethal results for the survivor."

In Conway's phones there was the sound of a short, heavy sigh, then the Lieutenant went on; "We've been forced to set up locks outside every bulkhead we came to so that if there *should* be an atmosphere on the other side when we burn through, the pressure drop will be only fractional.

But it's a very time-wasting business, and no short cuts are possible which would not risk the safety of the alien."

"Surely more rescue teams would be the answer," Conway said. "If there aren't enough on your ship we can bring them from the hospital. That would cut down the time required – "

"No, Doctor!" Hendricks said emphatically. "Why do you think we parked five hundred miles out? There is evidence of considerable power storage in this wreck and until we know exactly how and where, we have to go easy. We want to save the alien, you understand, but we don't want to blow it and ourselves up. Didn't they tell you about this at the hospital?"

Conway shook his head. "Maybe they didn't want me to worry."

Hendricks laughed. "Neither do I. Seriously, the chance of a blow-up is vanishingly small providing we take proper precautions. But with men swarming all over the wreck, burning and pulling it apart, it would be a near-certainty."

While the Lieutenant had been talking they passed through two other compartments and along a short corridor. Conway noticed that the interior of each room had a different colour scheme. The survivor's race, he thought, must have highly individual notions regarding interior decoration.

He said, "When do you expect to get through to it?"

This was a simple question which required

a long, complicated answer, Hendricks explained ruefully. The alien had made its presence known by noise – or more accurately, by the vibrations set up in the fabric of the ship by its movements. But the condition of the wreck plus the fact that its movements were of irregular duration and weakening made it impossible to judge its position with certainty. They were cutting a way towards the centre of the wreck on the assumption that that was where an undamaged, airtight compartment was most likely to be. Also, they were missing any later movements it made, which might have given them a fix on its position, because of the noise and vibration set up by the rescue team.

Boiled down, the answer was between three and seven hours.

And after they made contact with it, thought

Conway, he had to sample, analyse and reproduce its atmosphere, ascertain its pressure and gravity requirements, prepare it for transfer to the hospital and do whatever he could for its injuries until it could be treated properly.

"Far too long," said Conway, aghast. The survivor could not be expected, in its steadily weakening state, to survive indefinitely. "We'll have to prepare accommodation without actually seeing our patient – there's nothing else for it. Now this is what we'll do..."

Rapidly, Conway gave instruction for tearing up sections of floor plating so as to bare the artificial gravity grids beneath. This sort of thing was not in his line, he told Hendricks, but no doubt the Lieutenant could make a fair guess at their output. There was only one known way of

neutrailising gravity used by all the space-going races of the Galaxy; if the survivor's species had a different way of doing it then they might as well give up there and then.

"...The physical characteristics of any life-form," he went on, "can be deduced from specimens of their food supply, the size and power demands of their artificial gravity grids, and air trapped in odd sections of piping. Enough data of this sort would enable us to reproduce its living conditions – "

"Some of the loose objects floating around must be food containers," Kursedd put in suddenly.

"That's the idea," Conway agreed. "But obtaining and analysing a sample of air must come first. That way we'll have a rough idea of its metabolism, which should

help you to tell which cans hold paint and which syrup – !"

Seconds later the search to detect and isolate the wreck's air-supply system was under way. The quantity of plumbing in any compartment of a spaceship was necessarily large, Conway knew, but the amount of piping which ran through even the smallest rooms in this ship left him feeling astonished by its complexity. The sight caused a vague stirring at the back of his mind, but either his association centres were not working properly or the stimulus was too weak for him to make anything out of it.

Conway and the others were working on the assumption that if a compartment could be sealed by airtight bulkheads, then the pipelines supplying air to that section would be interrupted by cut-off valves

where they entered and left it. The finding of a section of piping containing atmosphere was therefore only a matter of time. But the maze of plumbing all around them included control and power *lines*, some of which must still be live. So each section of piping had to be traced back to a break or other damage which allowed them to identify it as *not* belonging to the air-supply system. It was a long, exhausting process of elimination, and Conway raged inwardly at this sheerly mechanical puzzle on whose quick solution depended his patient's life. Furiously he wished that the team cutting into the wreck would contact the survivor, just so he could go back to being a fairly capable doctor instead of acting like an engineer with ten thumbs.

Two hours slipped by and they had the possibilities narrowed down to a single heavy pipe which was obviously the outlet,

and a thick bundle of metal tubing which just had to bring the air in.

Apparently there were seven air inlets!

"A being that needs seven different chemical..." began Hendricks, and lapsed into a baffled silence.

"Only one line carries the main constituent," Conway said. "The others must contain necessary trace elements or inert components, such as the nitrogen in our own air. If those regulator valves you can see on each tube had not closed, when the compartment lost pressure we could tell by the settings the proportions involved."

He spoke confidently, but Conway was not feeling that way. He had premonitions.

Kursedd moved forward. From its kit the nurse produced a small cutting torch, focussed the flame to a six-inch, incandescent needle, then gently brought it into contact with one of the seven inlet pipes. Conway moved closer, an open sample flask held at the ready.

Yellowish vapour spurted suddenly and Conway pounced. His flask now held little more than a slightly soft vacuum, but there was enough of the gas caught inside for analysis purposes. Kursedd attacked another section of tubing.

"Judging by sight alone I would say that is chlorine," the DBLF said as it worked. "And if chlorine is the main constituent of its atmosphere then a modified PVSJ ward could take the survivor."

"Somehow," said Conway, "I don't think it will be as simple as that."

He had barely finished speaking when a high-pressure jet of white vapour filled the room with fog. Kursedd jerked back instinctively, pulling the flame away from the holed pipe, and the vapour changed to a clear liquid which bubbled out to hang as shrinking, furiously steaming globes all around them. They looked and acted like water, Conway thought, as he collected another sample.

With the third puncture the cutting flame, held momentarily in the jet of escaping gas, swelled and brightened visibly. That reaction was unmistakable.

"Oxygen," said Kursedd, putting Conway's thoughts into words, "or a high oxygen content."

"The water doesn't bother me," Hendricks put in, "but chlorine and oxy is a pretty unbreathable mixture."

"I agree," said Conway. "Any being who breaths chlorine finds oxygen lethal in a matter of seconds, and vice versa. But one of the gases might form a very small percentage of the whole, a mere trace. It is also possible that both gases are trace constituents and the main component hasn't turned up yet."

The four remaining lines were pierced and samples taken within a few minutes, during which Kursedd had obviously been pondering over Conway's statement. Just before it left for the tender and the analysis equipment therein the nurse paused.

"If these gases are in trace quantity

only," it said in its toneless, Translated voice, "why are not all the trace and inert elements, even the oxydiser or its equivalent, pre-mixed and pumped in together as we and most other races do it? They all leave by one pipe."

Conway harrumphed. Precisely the same question had been bothering him, and he couldn't even begin to answer it. He said sharply, "Right now I want those samples analysed, get moving on that. Lieutenant Hendricks and I will try to work out the physical size and pressure requirements of the being. And don't worry," he ended drily, "all things will eventually become plain."

"Let us hope the answers come during curative surgery," Kursedd gave out as a parting shot, "and not at the post-mortem."

Without further urging Hendricks began

lifting aside the buckled floor plating to get at the artificial gravity grids. Conway thought that he looked like a man who knew exactly what he was doing, so he left him to it and went looking for furniture.

Chapter Three

The disaster had not been as other shipwrecks, where all movable objects together with a large number normally supposed to be immovable were lifted and hurled towards the point of impact. Here, instead, there had been a brief, savage shock which had disrupted the binding powers of practically every bolt, rivet and weld in the ship. Furniture, which was about the most easily damaged item in any ship, had suffered worst.

From a chair or bed could be told the

shape, carriage and number of limbs of its user with fair accuracy, or if it possessed a hard tegument or required artificial padding for comfort. And a study of materials and design could give the gravity-pull which the being considered normal. But Conway was dead out of luck.

Some of the bits and pieces floating weightless in every compartment were almost certainly furniture, but they were so thoroughly mixed together that it was like trying to make sense of the scrambled parts of sixteen jig-saw puzzles. He thought of calling O'Mara, then decided against it. The Major would not be interested in how well he wasn't getting on.

He was searching the ruins of what might have been a row of lockers, hoping wistfully to strike a bonanza in the shape of clothing or an E-T pin-up picture, when

Kursedd called.

"The analysis is complete," the nurse reported. "There is nothing unusual about the samples when considered separately. As a mixture they would be lethal to any species possessing a respiratory system. Mix them any way you want the result is a sludgy, poisonous mess."

"Be more explicit," said Conway sharply. "I want data, not opinions."

"As well as the gases already identified," Kursedd replied, "there is ammonia, CO₂, and two inerts. Together, and in any combination of which I can conceive, they form an atmosphere which is heavy, poisonous and highly opaque..."

"It can't be!" Conway snapped back. "You saw their interior paintwork, they used

pastels a lot. Races living in an opaque atmosphere would not be sensitive to subtle variations of colour – "

"Doctor Conway," Hendricks' voice broke in apologetically, "I've finished checking that grid. So far as I can tell it's rigged to pull five Gs."

A pull of five times Earth-normal gravity meant a proportionately high atmospheric pressure. The being must breathe a thick, poisonous soup – but a clear soup, he added hastily to himself. And there were other more immediate, and perhaps deadly, implications as well.

To Hendricks he said quickly, "Tell the rescue team to watch their step – without slowing down, if possible. Any beastie living under five Gs is apt to have muscles, and people in the survivors' position have

been known to run amok."

"I see what you mean," said Hendricks worriedly, and signed off. Conway returned to Kursedd.

"You heard the Lieutenant's report," he resumed in a quieter voice. "Try combinations under high pressure. And remember, we want a *clear* atmosphere!"

There was a long pause, then: "Very well. But I must add that I dislike wasting time, even when I am ordered to do so."

For several seconds Conway practised savage self restraint until a click in his phones told him that the DBLF had broken contact. Then he said a few words which, even had they been subjected to the emotion-filtering process of Translation,

would have left no doubt in any E-T's mind that he was angry.

But slowly his rage towards this stupid, conceited, downright impertinent nurse he had been given began to fade. Perhaps Kursedd wasn't stupid, no matter what else it might be. Suppose it was right about the opacity of that atmosphere, where did that leave them? The answer was with yet another piece of contradictory evidence.

The whole wreck was stuffed with contradictions, Conway thought wearily. The design and construction did not suggest a high-G species, yet the artificial gravity grids could produce up to five Gs. And the interior colour schemes pointed to a race possessing a visual range close to Conway's own. But the air they lived in, according to Kursedd, would need radar to see through. Not to mention a needlessly

complex air-supply system and a bright orange outer hull...

For the twentieth time Conway tried to form a meaningful picture from the data at his disposal, in vain. Maybe if he attacked the problem from a different direction...

Abruptly he snapped on his radio's transmit switch and said, "Lieutenant Hendricks, will you connect me with the hospital, please. I want to talk to O'Mara. And I would like Captain Summerfield, yourself and Kursedd in on it, too. Can you arrange that?"

Hendricks made an affirmative noise and said, "Hang on a minute."

Interspersed by clicks, buzzes and bleeps, Conway heard the chopped-up voices of

Hendricks, a Monitor radio officer on *Sheldon* calling up the hospital and requesting Summerfield to come to the radio room, and the flat, Translated tones of an E-T operator in the hospital itself. In a little under the stipulated minute the babble subsided and the stern, familiar voice of O'Mara barked, "Chief Psychologist here. Go ahead."

As briefly as possible Conway outlined the situation at the wreck, his lack of progress to date and the contradictory data they had uncovered. Then he went on, "...The rescue team is working towards the centre of the wreck because that is the most likely place for the survivor to be. But it may be in a pocket off to one side somewhere and we may have to search every compartment in the ship to be sure of finding it. This could take many days. The survivor," he went on grimly, "if not already dead must

be in a very bad way. We don't have that much time."

"You have a problem, Doctor. What are you going to do about it?"

"Well," Conway replied evasively, "a more general picture of the situation might help. If Captain Summerfield could tell me about the finding of the wreck – its position, course, or any personal impressions he can remember. For instance, would the extension each way of its direction of flight help us find its planet of origin? That would solve – "

"I'm afraid not, Doctor," Summerfield's voice came in. "Sighting backwards we found that its course passed through a not too distant solar system. But this system had been mapped by us over a century previous and listed as a future possibility

for colonisation, which as you know means that it was devoid of intelligent life. No race can rise from nothing to a spaceship technology in one hundred years, so the wreck could not have originated in that system. Extending the line forwards led nowhere – into intergalactic space, to be exact. In my opinion, the accident must have caused a violent change in course, so that the wreck's position and course when found will tell you nothing."

"So much for that idea," said Conway sadly, then in a more determined voice he went on, "But the other half of the wreck is out there somewhere. If we could find that, especially if it contained the body or bodies of other members of its crew, that would solve everything! I admit that it's a roundabout way to do it, but judging by our present rate of progress it might be the fastest way. I want a search made for the

other half of the wreck," Conway ended, and waited for the storm to break.

Captain Summerfield demonstrated that he had the fastest reaction time by getting in the first blast.

"Impossible! You don't know what you're asking! It would take two hundred units or more – a whole Sector sub-fleet! – to cover that area in the time necessary to do you any good. And all this is just to find a dead specimen so you can analyse it and maybe help another specimen, which by that time might be dead as well. I know that life is more valuable in your book than any material considerations," Summerfield continued in a somewhat quieter voice, "but this verges on the ridiculous. Besides, I haven't the authority to order, or even suggest, such an operation – "

"The Hospital has," O'Mara broke in gruffly, then to Conway: "You're sticking your neck out, Doctor. If as a result of the search the survivor is saved, I don't think much will be said regarding the fuss and expense caused. The Corps might even give you a pat on the back for putting them onto another intelligent species. But if this alien dies, or it turns out that it was already dead before the search was begun, you, Doctor, are for it."

Looking at the thing honestly, Conway could not say that he was more than normally concerned about his patient, and definitely not enough to want to throw away his career in the faint hope of saving the being. It was more an angry curiosity which drove him, and a vague feeling that the conflicting data they possessed formed part of a picture which included much more than just a wreck and its lone survivor.

Aliens did not build ships for the sole purpose of bewildering Earth-human doctors, so the apparently contradictory evidence had to mean something.

For a moment Conway thought he had the answer. Growing at the fringes of his mind was a dim, still-formless picture.... which was obliterated, violently and completely, by the excited voice of Hendricks in his phones: *"Doctor, we've found the alien!"* When Conway joined him a few minutes later he found a portable airlock in position. Hendricks and the men of the rescue team had their helmets together talking, so as not to tie up the radio circuit. But the most wonderful sight of all to Conway the tightly-stretched fabric of the lock.

There was pressure inside.

Hendricks switched suddenly to radio and said, "You can go in, Doctor. Now that we've found it we can open the door instead of melting through." He indicated the taut fabric beside him and added, "Pressure in there is about twelve pounds."

That wasn't a lot, thought Conway soberly, considering that the survivor's normal environment was supposed to be five-Gs, with the tremendous air-pressure which went with such a killing gravity. He hoped that it was enough to sustain life. There must have been a slow leakage of air since the accident, he thought. Maybe the being's internal pressure had equalised sufficiently to save it.

"Get an air sample to Kursedd, quickly!" Conway said. Once they knew the composition it used it would be a simple matter to increase pressure when they had

the being in the tender. He added quickly, "And I want four men to stand by at the tender. We'll need special equipment to get the survivor out of here and I might need it in a hurry."

With Hendricks he entered the tiny lock. The Lieutenant checked the seals, worked the manual control beside the door, and straightened up. A creaking in Conway's suit told of mounting pressure as air from the compartment beyond rushed in. It was clear air, he noted with some satisfaction, and not the super-thick fog which Kursedd had predicted. The air-tight door slid *aside*, hesitated as the still-hot section moved into its recess, then came fully open with a rush.

"Don't come in unless I call you," Conway said quietly, and stepped through. In his phones there was a grunt of assent

from Hendricks, followed closely by the voice of Kursedd announcing that it was recording.

The first glimpse of a new physiological type was always a confused blur to Conway. His mind insisted on trying to relate its physical features to others in his experience, and whether it was successful or not in this the process took a little time.

"Conway!" O'Mara's voice came sharply. "Have you gone to sleep?"

Conway had forgotten about O'Mara, Summerfield and the assorted radio operators who were still linked up with him. He cleared his throat and hastily began to talk: "The being is ring-shaped, rather like a large balloon tyre. Overall diameter of the ring is about nine feet, with the thickness between two and three feet. Mass appears

to be about four times my own. I can see no movements, nor indications of gross physical injury." He took a deep breath and went on, "Tegument is smooth, shiny and grey in colour where it is not covered with a thick, brownish incrustation. The brown stuff, which covers more than half of the total skin area, looks cancerous but may be some type of natural camouflage. Or it might be the result of severe decompression.

The outer surface of the ring contains a double row of short, tentacular limbs at present folded flat against the body. There are five pairs, and no evidence of specialisation. Neither can I see any visual organs or means of ingestion. I'm going to have a closer look."

There was no visible reaction as he approached the creature, and he began to wonder if they had reached it too late.

There was still no sign of eyes or mouth, but he could see small gill-like openings and something which looked like an ear. He reached out and gently touched one of the tightly-folded limbs.

The being seemed to explode.

Conway was sent spinning backwards against the floor, his whole right arm numb from the blow which, had he not been wearing a heavy duty suit, would have smashed his wrist. Frantically he worked the G-belt controls to hold him against the deck, then began inching backwards towards the door. The babble of questions in his phones gradually sorted itself into two main ones: Why had he shouted, and what were the banging noises currently going on?

Conway said shakily, "Uh! have established that the survivor is alive..."

The watching Hendricks made a chocking sound. "I don't believe," said the Lieutenant in an awed voice, "that I have ever seen anything more so."

"Talk sense, you two!" O'Mara snapped. "What is happening?"

That was a difficult question to answer, Conway thought as he watched the tyre-like being half-rolling, half-bouncing about the compartment. Physical contact with the survivor had triggered off a panic reaction, and while Conway had without doubt been the cause the first time, now contact with *anything* – walls, floor, or loose debris floating about the room – had the same

result. Five pairs of strong, flexible limbs lashed out in a vicious, two-foot radius arc, the force of which sent the being skidding across the room again. And no matter which part of the massive ring body was it struck out blindly in all directions at once.

Conway made it to the shelter of the portable lock just as a fortunate combination of circumstances left the alien floating helpless in the middle of the compartment, spinning slowly and bearing a remarkable resemblance to one of the old-time space stations. But it *was* drifting towards one of the walls again, and he had to get things organised before it started bouncing around a second time.

Ignoring O'Mara for the moment, Conway said quickly, "We'll need a fine-mesh net, size five, a plastic envelope to go over it, and a set of pumps. In its present state we

can expect no co-operation from the being. When it is under restraint and encased in the envelope we can pump in its own air, which should keep it going until it reaches the tender. By that time Kursedd should be ready for it. But hurry with that net!"

How a high-pressure life-form could display such violent activity in what must be to it extremely rarefied air was something Conway could not understand.

"Kursedd, how is the analysis going?" he asked suddenly.

The answer was so long in coming that Conway had almost decided that the nurse had broken contact, but eventually the slow, necessarily emotionless voice replied, "It is complete. The composition of the air in the survivor's compartment is such that, if you were to take off your

helmet, Doctor, you could breathe it yourself."

And that, thought Conway, stunned, was the wildest contradiction of all. Kursedd must be equally flabbergasted, he knew. Suddenly he laughed, thinking of what the nurse's fur must be doing now...

Chapter Four

Six hours later, after struggling furiously for every minute of the way, the survivor had been transferred to Ward 310B, a small observation room with theatre off the main DBLF Surgical ward. By now Conway wasn't sure whether he wanted to restore the alien to health or murder it, and judging by the comments during the transfer of Kursedd and the Corpsmen they were similarly confused. Conway made a preliminary examination – as thorough as possible considering the restraining net – and finished off by taking blood and skin samples. These he sent to Pathology,

plastered with red Most Urgent labels. Kursedd took them up personally rather than commit them to the pneumo tube, because the pathological staff were notoriously colour blind where priority labels were concerned. Finally he ordered x-rays to be taken, left Kursedd to keep the patient under observation, then went to see O'Mara.

When he had finished, O'Mara said, "The hardest part is over now. But I expect you want to follow through on this case?"

"I... I don't think so," Conway replied.

O'Mara frowned heavily. "If you don't want to go on with it, say so. I don't approve of dithering."

Conway breathed through his nose, then

slowly and with exaggerated distinctness said, "I want to continue with the case. The doubt which I expressed was not due to an inability to make up my mind on this point, but was with regard to your mistaken assumption that the hardest part is over. It isn't. I have made a preliminary examination and when the results of the tests are in I intend making a more detailed one tomorrow. When I do so, I would like to have present, if it is possible, Doctors Mannon and Prilicla, Colonel Skempton and yourself."

O'Mara's eyebrows went up. He said, "An odd selection of talent, Doctor. Mind telling me what you need us for?" Conway shook his head. "I'd rather not, just yet."

"Very well, we'll be there," O'Mara said with forced gentleness. "And I apologise for suggesting that you were a ditherer, when

all you did was mumble and yawn in my face so much that I could only make out one word in three. Now go away and get some sleep, Doctor, before I brain you with something."

It was only then that Conway realised how tired he was. His gait on the way to his room must be closer to a weary shuffle, he thought, than an unhurried, confident tread.

Next morning Conway spent two hours with his patient before calling for the consultation he had requested from O'Mara. Everything which he had discovered, and that wasn't a great deal, made it plain that nothing constructive could be done for the being without bringing in some highly-specialised help.

Dr. Prilicla, the spidery, low-gravity and extremely fragile being of physiological

classification GLNO, arrived first. O'Mara and Colonel Skempton, the hospital's senior engineering officer, came together. Dr. Mannon, because of a job in the DBLF theatre, arrived late at a near run, braked, then walked slowly round the patient twice.

"Looks like a doughnut," he said, "with barnacles."

Everyone looked at him.

"They aren't anything so simple and harmless," Conway said, wheeling the x-ray scanner forward, "but a growth which the pathological boys say shows every indication of being malignant. And if you'll look through here you'll see that it isn't a doughnut, but possesses a fairly normal anatomy of the DBLF type – a cylindrical, lightly-boned body with heavy musculature. The being is not ring-shaped, but gives that

impression because for some reason known best to itself it has been trying to swallow its tail."

Mannon stared intently into the scanner, gave an incredulous grunt, then straightened up. "A vicious circle if ever I saw one," he muttered, then added: "Is this why O'Mara is here? You suspect marbles missing?"

Conway did not think the question serious, and ignored it. He went on, "The growth is thickest where the mouth and tail of the patient come together, in fact it is so widespread in that area that it is nearly impossible to see the joint. Presumably this growth is painful or at least highly irritant, and an intolerable itch might explain why it is apparently biting its own tail. Alternatively, its present physical posture might be due to an involuntary muscular

contraction brought about by the growth, a type of epileptic spasm..."

"I like the second idea best," Mannon broke in. "For the condition to spread from mouth to tail, or vice-versa, the jaws must have locked in that position for a considerable time."

Conway nodded. He said, "Despite the artificial gravity equipment in the wreck I've established that the patient's air, pressure and gravity requirements are very similar to our own. Those gill openings back of the head and not yet reached by the growth are breathing orifices. The smaller openings, partly covered by flaps of muscle, are ears. So the patient can hear and breathe, but not eat. You all agree that freeing the mouth should be the first step?"

Mannon and O'Mara nodded. Prilicla

spread four manipulators in a gesture which meant the same thing, and Colonel Skempton stared woodenly at the ceiling, very obviously wondering what *he* was doing here? Without further delay, Conway began to tell him.

While Mannon and he decided on the operative procedure, the Colonel and Dr. Prilicla were to handle the communications angle. By using its emphatic faculty the GLNO could listen for a reaction while a couple of Skempton's Translator technicians ran sound tests. Once the patient's audio range was known a Translator could be modified to suit it, and the being would be able to help them in the diagnosis and treatment of its complaint.

"This place is crowded enough already," the Colonel said stiffly. "I'll handle this myself." He strode across to the intercom

to order the equipment he needed. Conway turned to O'Mara.

"Don't tell me, let me guess," the psychologist began before Conway could speak. "I'm to have the easiest bit – that of reassuring the patient once we're able to talk to it, and convincing it that you pair of butchers mean it no harm."

"That's it exactly," Conway said, grinning, and returned all his attention to the patient.

Prilicla reported that the survivor was unaware of them and that the emotional radiation was so slight that it suggested the being was both unconscious and close to physical exhaustion. Despite this, Conway warned them all against touching the patient.

Conway had seen malignant growths in his time, both terrestrial and otherwise, but this one took a lot of beating. Like a tough, fibrous bark of a tree it completely covered the joint between the patient's mouth and tail. And to add to their trouble the bone structure of the jaw, with which they would be chiefly concerned during the operation, could not be seen plainly with the scanner because of the fact that the growth itself was nearly opaque to x-rays. The being's eyes were also somewhere under the thick, obscuring shell, which was another reason for going carefully.

Mannon indicated the blurred picture in the scanner and said vehemently, "It wasn't scratching to relieve an itch. Those teeth are really locked on, it has practically bitten its tail off! Definitely an epileptic condition, I'd say. Or such self-inflicted punishment could mean mental unbalance..."

"Oh, *great!*" said O'Mara disgustedly from behind them.

Skempton's equipment arrived then, and Prilicla and the Colonel began calibrating a Translator for the patient. Being practically unconscious, the test sounds had to be of a mind-wrecking intensity to get through to it, and Mannon and Conway were driven out to the main ward to finish their discussion.

Half an hour later Prilicla came out to tell them that they could talk to the patient, but that the being's mind still seemed to be only partly conscious. They hurried in.

O'Mara was saying that they were all friends, that they liked and felt sympathy for the patient, and that they would do

everything in their power to help it. He spoke quietly into his own Translator, and a series of alien clicks and gobbles roared out from the other which had been placed near the patient's head. In the pauses between sentences Prilicla *reported* on the being's mental state.

"Confusion, anger, great fear," the GLNO's voice came tonelessly through its own Translator. And for several minutes the intensity and type of emotional radiation remained constant. Conway decided to take the next step.

"Tell it I am going to make physical contact," he said to O'Mara. "That I apologise for any discomfort this may cause, but that I intend no harm."

He took a long, needle-pointed probe and gently touched the area where the growth

was thickest. The GLNO reported no reaction. Apparently it was only on an area unaffected by the growth where a touch could send the patient wild. Conway felt that at least he was beginning to get somewhere.

Switching off the patient's Translator, he said, "I was hoping for this. If the affected areas are dead to pain we should be able, with the patient's co-operation, to cut the mouth free without using an anaesthetic. As yet we don't know enough about its metabolism to anaesthetise without risk of killing the patient. Are you sure," he asked Prilicla suddenly, "that it hears and understands what we're saying?"

"Yes, Doctor," the GLNO replied, "so long as you speak slowly and without ambiguity."

Conway switched the Translator on again and said quietly, "We are going to help you. First we will enable you to resume your natural posture by freeing your mouth, and then we will remove this growth..."

Abruptly the restraining net bulged as five pairs of tentacles whipped furiously back and forwards. Conway jumped away cursing, angry with the patient and angrier with himself for having rushed things too much.

"Fear and anger," and Prilicla, and added: "The being... it seems to have reasons for these emotions."

"But *why*? I'm trying to *help* it... !"

The patient's struggles increased to a violence that was incredible. Prilicla's

fragile, pipestem body trembled under the impact of the emotional gale from the survivor's mind. One of its tentacles, a member which projected from the growth area, became entangled in a fold of net and was torn off.

Such blind, unreasoning panic, Conway thought sickly. But Prilicla had said that there were reasons for this reaction on the alien's part. Conway swore: even the workings of the survivor's mind were contradictory.

"Well!" said Mannon explosively, when the patient had quietened down again.

"Fear, anger, hatred," the GLNO reported. "I would say, most definitely, that it does not want your help."

"We have here," O'Mara put in grimly, "a very sick beastie indeed."

The words seemed to echo back and forth in Conway's brain, growing louder and more insistent every time. They had significance. O'Mara had, of course, been alluding to the mental condition of the patient, but that didn't matter. *A very sick beastie* – that was the key-piece of the puzzle, and the picture was beginning to fall into place around it. As yet it was incomplete, but there was enough of it there to make Conway feel more horribly afraid that he had ever been before in his life.

When he spoke he hardly recognised his own voice. "Thank you, gentlemen. I'll have to think of another approach. When I do I'll let you know..."

Conway wished that they would all go away and let him think this thing out. He also wanted to run away and hide somewhere, except that there was probably nowhere in the whole Galaxy safe from what he was afraid.

They were all staring at him now, their expressions reflecting a mixture of surprise, concern and embarrassment. Lots of patients resisted treatment aimed at helping them, but that didn't mean the doctor ceased treating such a case at the first sign of resistance. Obviously they thought he had taken cold feet over what promised to be a highly unpleasant and technically strenuous operation, and in their various ways they tried to reassure him. Even Skempton was offering suggestions.

"...If a safe anaesthetic is your chief

problem," the Colonel was saying, "isn't it possible for Pathology to develop one, from a dead or damaged, er, specimen. I have in mind the search you requested earlier. It seems to me you have ample reason to order it now. Shall I – "

"No!" They were really staring at him now. O'Mara in particular wore a decidedly clinical expression. Conway said hurriedly, "I forgot to tell you that Summerfield contacted me again. He says that current investigations now show that the wreck, instead of being the most nearly intact half of the original ship, is the half which came off worst in the accident. The other part, he says instead of being scattered all over space, was probably in good enough shape to make it home under its own steam. So you can see that the search would be pointless."

Conway hoped desperately that Skempton was not going to be difficult about this, or insist on checking the information himself. Summerfield had reported again from the wreck, but the Captain's findings had not been nearly so definite as Conway had just made out. The thought of a Monitor search force blundering about in that area of space, in the light of what he knew now, made Conway break into a cold sweat.

But the Colonel merely nodded and dropped the subject. Conway relaxed, a little, and said quickly, "Dr. Prilicla, I would like a discussion with you on the patient's emotional state during the past few minutes, but later. Thank you again, gentlemen, for your advice and assistance..." He was practically kicking them out, and their expressions told him that they knew it — there was going to be some very searching questions asked

about his behaviour in this affair by O'Mara, but at the moment Conway didn't care. When they had gone he told Kursedd to make a visual check on the patient's condition every half hour, and to call him if there was any change. Then he headed for his room.

Chapter Five

Conway had often grouched at the tininess of the place where he slept, kept his few personal possessions, and infrequently entertained colleagues, but now its very smallness was comforting. He sat down as there was no room to pace about. He began to extend and fill in the picture which had come in a single flash of insight back in the ward.

Really, the thing had been staring him in the face from the very beginning. First there had been the wreck's artificial gravity

grids – Conway had stupidly overlooked the fact that they did not have to be operated at full power, but could be turned to any point between zero and five-Gs. Then there had been the air-supply layout – confusing only because he had not realised that it had been designed to many different forms of life instead of only one. And there had been the physical condition of the survivor, and the colour of the outer hull – a nice, urgent, dramatic orange. Earth ships of that type, even surface vessels, were traditionally painted white.

The wreck was an ambulance ship.

But interstellar vessels of any kind were products of an advanced technical culture which must cover, or shortly hope to cover, many solar systems. And when a culture progressed to the point where such ships reached the stage of simplification and

specialisation which had been reached here, then that race was highly advanced indeed. In the Galactic Federation only the cultures of Illensa, Traltha and Earth had reached that stage, and their spheres of influence were tremendous. How could a culture of that size have remained hidden for so long?

Conway squirmed uneasily in his couch: he had the answer to that question, too.

Summerfield had said that the wreck was the worst damaged section of a ship, the other half of which could be presumed to have continued under its own power to the nearest repair base. So the section containing the survivor had been torn from the ship during the original accident, which meant that the course constants of this unpowered fragment had to be the same as that of the ship as a whole before the

disaster.

The ship had been coming, then, from a planet which was listed as uninhabited. But in a hundred years someone could have set up a base there, or even a colony. And the ambulance ship had been heading away from that world and into intergalactic space...

A culture which had crossed from one Galaxy to plant a colony on the fringes of this one, Conway thought grimly, had to be treated with great respect. And caution. Especially since its only representative so far could not, by any stretch of toleration or semantic word-juggling, be considered nice. And the survivor's race, probably highly advanced medically might not take kindly to news that someone was botching the treatment of one of their sick. On the present evidence Conway thought that they

would not take kindly to anything or anybody.

Interstellar wars of conquest were logistically impossible, Conway knew. But the same did not apply to simple wars of annihilation, where planetary atmospheres were exploded or otherwise rendered useless forever with no thought of eventual occupation or assimilation. Remembering his last contact with the patient, Conway wondered if at last they had encountered a completely vicious and inimical race.

The communicator buzzed suddenly. It was Kursedd reporting that the patient had been quiet for the last hour, but that the growth seemed to be spreading rapidly and threatened to cover one of the being's breathing openings. Conway said he would be along presently. He put out a call for Dr. Prilicla, then sat down again.

He dare not tell anyone of his discovery, Conway told himself as he resumed his interrupted thought. To do so would mean a force of Monitors swarming out there to make premature contact – premature, that was, so far as Conway was concerned. For he was afraid that that first meeting between cultures would be in the nature of an ideological head-on collision, and the only possibility of cushioning the shock would be if the Federation could show that they had rescued, taken care of, and *cured* one of the intergalactic colonists.

Of course there was the possibility that the patient was atypical of its race, that it was mentally ill as O'Mara had suggested. But Conway doubted if the aliens would consider that an excuse for not curing it. And against that idea was the fact that the patient had had logical – to it – reasons for

being afraid and hating the person trying to help it. For a moment Conway wondered wildly if there was such a thing as a contra-terrene mind, a mentality wherein assistance produced feelings of hate instead of gratitude. Even the fact of its being found in an ambulance was no reassurance. To people like himself the concept of an ambulance had altruistic implications, errands of mercy, and so on. But many races, even within the Federation, tended to look upon illness as mere physical inefficiency and corrected it as such.

As he left his room Conway did not have the faintest idea of how to go about curing his patient. Neither, he knew, did he have much time to do it in. At the moment, Captain Summerfield, Hendricks and the others investigating the wreck were too dazzled by a multiplicity of puzzles to think

about anything else. But it was only a matter of time before they got around to it, a matter of days or even hours, and then they would come to the same conclusions as had Conway.

Shortly thereafter the Monitor Corps would make contact with the aliens, who would naturally want to know about their ailing brother, who by that time would have to be either cured or well on the way to recovery.

Or else.

The thought which Conway tried desperately to keep from thinking *was: What if the patient died...?* Before beginning the next examination he questioned Prilicla regarding the patient's emotional state, but learned nothing new. The being was now motionless and

practically unconscious. When Conway spoke to it via the Translator it emoted fear, even when Prilicla assured him that it understood what he was saying.

"I will not harm you," Conway said slowly and distinctly into the Translator, moving closer as he spoke, "but it is necessary that I touch you. Please believe me, I mean no harm..." He looked enquiringly at Prilicla.

The GLNO said, "Fear and... and helplessness. Also acceptance mixed with threats... no, warnings. Apparently it believes what you say, but is trying to warn you about something."

This was more promising, Conway thought. It was warning him, but it didn't mind him touching it. He moved closer and gently touched the being with his gloved hand on one of the unaffected areas of tegument.

He grunted with the violence of the blow which knocked his arm aside. He backed away hurriedly, rubbing his arm, then switched off the Translator so as to give vent to his feelings.

After a respectful pause, the GLNO said, "We have obtained a very important datum, Dr. Conway. Despite the physical reaction the patient's feelings toward you are exactly the same as they were before you touched it."

"So what?" said Conway irritably.

"So that the reaction must be involuntary."

Conway digested that for a moment, then said disgustedly, "It also means we can't

risk a general anaesthetic, even if we had one, because the heart and lungs use involuntary muscles, too. That's another complication. We can't knock it out and it won't co-operate..." He moved to the ward control panel and pushed buttons. The clamps holding the net opened and the net itself was whisked away by a grab. He went on, "It keeps injuring itself on that net, you can see where it has nearly lost another appendage."

Prilicla objected to the removal of the net, saying that if the patient was free to move about it was more likely than ever to injure itself. Conway pointed out that in its present posture — head to tail and underbelly, which contained its five sets of tentacles, facing outwards — it could do little moving about. And now that he thought of it, that position looked like the perfect defensive stance for the creature. It

reminded him of the way an Earth cat lies on its side during a fight, so as to bring all four of its claws to bear. This was a ten-legged cat who could defend itself from all directions at once.

Built-in involuntary reactions of that order were the product of evolution. But why should the being adopt this defensive position and make itself completely unapproachable at the time when it needed help the most...?

Suddenly, like a great light bursting in his mind, Conway knew the answer. Or, he amended with cautious excitement, he was near ninety per cent sure that he did.

They had all been making wrong assumptions about this case from the start. His new theory hinged on the fact that they

had made a further wrong assumption, single, simple and basic. Given that then the patient's hostility, physical posture and mental state could all be explained. It even indicated the only possible line 'of treatment to be taken. Best of all, it gave Conway reason for thinking that the patient might not belong to the type of vicious and implacably hostile race which its behaviour had led him to believe.

The only trouble with the new theory was that it, also might be wrong.

His first wild enthusiasm waned and his degree of certainty dropped to the mid-eighties. Another trouble was that he could not possibly discuss his intended line of treatment with anyone. To do so might mean demotion, and to insist on carrying through with it would mean his dismissal from the hospital should the patient die.

What he contemplated was as serious as that.

Conway approached the patient again and switched on the Translator. He knew before he spoke what the reaction would be so it was probably an act of wanton cruelty to say the words, but he had to test this theory once more for his own reassurance. He said, "Don't worry, young fellow we'll have you back the way you were in no time..."

The reaction was so violent that Dr. Prilicla, whose emphatic faculty made it feel everything which the patient felt at full intensity, had to leave the ward.

It was only then that Conway finally made his decision.

During the three days which followed Conway visited the ward regularly. He took careful notes on the rate of growth of the thick, fibrous incrustation which now covered two thirds of the patient's body. There could be no doubt that it was both accelerating and growing thicker. He sent specimens to Pathology, which reported that the patient appeared to be suffering from a peculiar and particularly virulent form of skin cancer and asked if curative radiation or surgery was possible. Conway replied that in his opinion neither were possible without grave danger to the patient.

About the most constructive thing he did during that time was to post instructions that anyone contacting the patient via Translator was to avoid trying to reassure it at all costs. The being had suffered too much already from that form of well-

meaning stupidity. If Conway could have forbidden entrance to the ward to everyone but Kursedd, Prilicla and himself he would have done so.

But the greater part of his time was spent in trying to convince himself that he was doing the right thing.

Conway had been deliberately avoiding Dr. Mannon since the original examination. He did not want his old friend discussing the case with him, because Mannon was too smart to be foisted off with double talk, and Conway could not tell even him the truth. He thought longingly that the ideal situation would be for Captain Summerfield to be kept too busy at the wreck to put two and two together, for O'Mara and Skempton to forget his existence, and for Mannon to keep his nose completely out of the affair.

But that was not to be.

Dr. Mannon was waiting for him in the ward when he made his second morning visit on the fifth day. Properly he requested Conway's permission to look at the patient. Then with this polite formality over he said, "...Listen, you young squirt, I'm getting fed up with you gazing abstractedly at your boots or the ceiling every time I come near you, — if I hadn't got the hide of a Tralthan I'd feel slighted. I know, of course, that newly-appointed Seniors take their responsibilities very heavily for the first few weeks, but your recent behaviour has been downright rude."

He held up his hand before Conway could speak, and went on, "I accept your apology, and now to business. I've been talking to Prilicla and the people up in Pathology. They tell me that the growth

now completely covers the body, that it is opaque to x-rays of safe intensities and that the placement and workings of the patient's internal organs can now only be guessed at. You can't cut the stuff away under anaesthetic because paralysing the appendages might knock out the heart, too. Yet an operation is impossible with those limbs whipping about. At the same time the patient is weakening and will continue to do so unless given food, which can't be done unless its mouth is freed. To complicate matters further your later specimens show that the growth is extending inwards rapidly as well, and there are indications that if the operation isn't done quickly the mouth and tail will have fused together. Is that, in a rather large nutshell, it?"

Conway nodded.

Mannon took a deep breath, then plunged on, "Suppose you amputate the limbs and remove the covering growth from head and tail, replacing the tegument with a suitable synthetic. With the patient able to take nourishment it would shortly be strong enough for the process to be repeated over the rest of its body. It is a drastic procedure, I admit. But in the circumstances it seems to be the only one which could save the patient's life. And there is always the possibility of successful grafting or artificial members – "

"No!" said Conway violently, and he knew from the way Mannon looked at him that he had gone pale. If his theory concerning the patient was correct, then any sort of operation at this stage would prove fatal. And if not, and the patient was the type of entity which it appeared to be – vicious, warped, and implacably hostile – and its

friends came looking for it...

In a quieter voice Conway said, "Suppose a friend of yours with a bad skin condition was picked up by an E-T doctor, and the only thing it could think of doing was to skin him alive and lop his arms and legs off. If or when him you would be annoyed. Even taking into fact that you are civilised, tolerant and prepared to make allowances – qualities which we cannot safely ascribe to the patient as yet – I would venture to suggest that there would be merry hell to play."

"That's not a true analogy and you know it I" Mannon said heatedly. "Sometimes you have to take chances. This is one of those times."

"No," said Conway again.

"Maybe you have a better suggestion?"

Conway was silent for a moment, then he said carefully, "I do have an idea which I'm trying out, but I don't want to discuss it just yet. If it works out you'll be the first to know, and if it doesn't you'll know anyhow. Everybody will."

Mannon shrugged and turned away. At the door he paused to say awkwardly, "Whatever you're doing it must be pretty hair-brained for you to be so secretive about it. But remember that if you call me in and the thing goes sour on us, the blame gets halved..."

And their speaks a true friend, thought Conway. He was tempted to unburden himself completely to Mannon then. But Dr. Mannon was a nosy, kindly and very able Senior Physician who always had and

always would take his profession as a healer very seriously, despite the cracks he often made about it. He might not be able to do what Conway would ask, or keep his mouth shut while Conway was doing it.

Regretfully, Conway shook his head.

Chapter Six

When Marmon had gone, Conway returned to his patient. Visually it still resembled a doughnut, he thought, but a doughnut which had become wrinkled and fossilised with the passage of aeons. He had to remind himself that only a week had passed since the patient had been admitted. The five pairs of limbs, all beginning to show signs of being affected by the growth, projected stiffly and at odd angles from the body, like petrified twigs on a rotten tree. Realising that the growth would cover the breathing openings, Conway had inserted tubes to keep the

respiratory passages clear. The tubes were having the desired effect, but despite this the respiration had slowed and become shallow. The stethoscope indicated that the heart beats were fainter but had increased in frequency.

Sheer indecision made Conway sweat.

If only it was an ordinary patient, Conway thought angrily: one that could be treated openly and its treatment discussed freely. But this one was complicated by the fact that it was a member of a highly advanced and possibly inimical race, and he could not confide in anyone lest he be pulled off the case before his theory was proven. And the trouble was that the theory might be all wrong. It was quite possible that he was engaged in slowly killing his patient.

Noting the heart and respiration rates on the chart, Conway decided that it was time he increased the periodicity of his visits, and also arranged the times so that Prilicla, who was busy these days in the Nursery, could accompany him.

Kursedd was watching him intently as he left the ward, and its fur was doing peculiar things. Conway did not waste his breath telling the nurse to keep quiet about what he was doing to his patient because that would have made the being gossip even more. It was he who was being talked about already by the nursing staff, and he had begun to detect a certain coldness towards him from some of the senior nurses in this section. But with any luck, word of what he was doing would not filter up to his seniors for several days.

Three hours later he was back in 310B with

Dr. Prilicla. He checked heart and respiration again while the GLNO probed for emotional radiation.

"It is very weak," Prilicla reported slowly. "Life is present, but so faintly that it is not even conscious of itself. Considering the almost non-existent respiration and weak, rapid pulse-rate..." The thought of death was particularly distressing to an empath, and the sensitive little being could not bring itself to finish the sentence.

"All these scares we gave it trying to reassure it didn't help," Conway said, half to himself. "It hadn't been able to eat and we caused it to use up reserves of energy which it badly needed to keep. But it had to protect itself..."

"But why? We were helping the patient."

"Of course we were," Conway said in a bitingly sarcastic tone which he knew would not carry through the other's Translator. He was about to continue with the examination when there was a sudden interruption.

The being whose vast bulk scraped both sides and the top of the ward door on its way in was a Tralthan, physiological classification FGLI. To Conway the natives of Traltha were as hard to tell apart as sheep, but he knew this one. This was no less than Thornnastor, Diagnostician-in-Charge of Pathology.

The Diagnostician curled two of its eyes in Prilicla's direction and boomed, "Get out of here, please. You too, Nurse." Then it turned all four of them on Conway.

"I am speaking to you alone,"

Thornnastor said when they had gone, "because some of my remarks have bearing on your professional conduct during this case, and I have no wish to increase your discomfort by public censure. However, I will begin by giving you the good news that we have produced a specific against this growth. Not only does it inhibit the condition spreading but it softens up the areas already affected and regenerates the tissues and blood-supply network involved."

Oh, *blast!* thought Conway. Aloud he said, "A splendid accomplishment." Because it really was.

"It would not have been possible had we not sent out a doctor to the wreck with instructions to send us anything which might throw light on the patient's metabolism," the Diagnostician continued.

"Apparently you overlooked this source of data completely, Doctor, because the only specimens you furnished were those taken from the wreck during the time you were there, a very small fraction indeed of the quantity which was available. This was sheer negligence, Doctor, and only your previous good record has kept you from being demoted and taken off this case..."

"But our success was due mainly to the finding of what appears to be a very well-equipped medical chest," Thornnastor continued. "Study of the contents together with other information regarding the fittings in the wreck led to the conclusion that it must have been some kind of ambulance ship. The Monitor Corps officers were very excited when we told them – "

"When?" said Conway sharply. The bottom had dropped out of everything and

he felt so cold that he might have been in shock. But there might be a chance to make Skempton delay making contact. "*When* did you tell them about it being an ambulance ship?"

"That information can be only of secondary interest to you," said Thornnastor, removing a large, padded flask from its satchel. "Your primary concern is, or should be, the patient. You will need a lot of this stuff, and we are synthesising it as quickly as we can, but there is enough here to free the head and mouth area. Inject according to instructions. It takes about an hour to show effect."

Conway lifted the flask carefully. Stalling for time, he said, "What about long term effects? I wouldn't like to risk — "

"Doctor," Thornnastor interrupted, "it seems to me that you are taking caution to foolish, even criminal, lengths." The Diagnostician's voice in Conway's Translator was emotionless, but he did not have to be an empath to know that the other was extremely angry... The way Thornnastor charged out the door made that more than plain.

Conway swore luridly. The Monitors were about to contact the alien colony, if they had not done so already, and very soon the aliens would be swarming all over the hospital demanding to know what he was doing for the patient. If it wasn't doing well by that time there would be trouble, no matter what sort of people they were. And much sooner than that would come trouble from inside the hospital, because he had not impressed Thornnastor with his professional ability at all.

In his hand was the flask whose contents would certainly do all that the Head Pathologist claimed – in short, cure what seemed to ail the patient. Conway dithered for a moment, then stuck grimly to the decision which he had made several days back. He managed to hide the flask before Prilicla returned.

"Listen to me carefully," Conway said savagely, "before you say anything at all. I don't want any arguments regarding the conduct of this case, Doctor. I think I know what I'm doing, but if I should be wrong and you were in on it, your professional reputation would suffer. Understand?"

Prilicla's six, pipe-stem legs had been quivering as he talked, but it was not the words which were affecting the little creature, it was the feelings behind them.

Conway knew that his emotional radiation just then was not a pleasant thing.

"I understand," said Prilicla.

"Very well," Conway said. "Now we'll get back to work. I want you to check me with the pulse and respiration, as well as the emotional radiation. There should be a variation soon and I don't want to miss it."

For two hours they listened and observed closely with no detectable change in the patient. At one point Conway left the being with Prilicla and Kursedd while he tried to contact Colonel Skempton. But he was told that the Colonel had left the hospital hurriedly three days ago, that he had given the spatial co-ordinates of his destination, but that it was impossible to contact a ship over interstellar distances while it was in motion. They were sorry but the Doctor's

message would have to wait until the Colonel got where he was going.

So it was too late to stop the Corps making contact with the aliens. The only course now was for him to 'cure' the patient.

If he was allowed...

The wall annunciator clicked, coughed and said, "Dr. Conway, report to Major O'Mara's office immediately." He was thinking bitterly that Thornnastor had lost no time in registering a complaint when Prilicla said, "Respiration almost gone. Irregular heart beat."

Conway snatched up the ward intercom mike and yelled, "Conway here. Tell O'Mara I'm busy!" Then to Prilicla he said, "I caught it, too. How about emotion?"

"Stronger during the erratic pulse, but both back to normal now. Registration is still fading."

"Right. Keep your ears and mind open."

Conway took a sample of expelled air from one of the breathing orifices and ran it through the analyser. Even considering the shallowness of the being's respiration this result, like the others he had taken during the past twelve hours, left no possibility for doubt. Conway began to feel a little more confident.

"Respiration almost gone," said Prilicla.

Before Conway could reply, O'Mara burst through the door. Stopping about six inches from Conway he said in a

dangerously quiet voice. "Just what are you busy at, Doctor?"

Conway was practically dancing with impatience. He asked pleadingly, "Can't this wait?"

"No."

He would not be able to get rid of the psychologist without some sort of explanation for his recent conduct, Conway knew, and he desperately wanted to have the next hour free from interference. He moved quickly to the patient and over his shoulder gave O'Mara a hasty resume of his deductions regarding the alien ambulance ship and the colony from which it had come. He ended by urging the psychologist to call Skempton to delay the first contact until something more definite was known about the patient's condition.

"So you knew all this a week ago and didn't tell us," O'Mara said thoughtfully, "and I can understand your reasons for keeping quiet. But the Corps had made a great many first contacts and managed them very well, thank you. We have people specially trained for this sort of thing; You, however, have been reacting like an ostrich – doing nothing and hoping that the problem would go away. This problem, involving a culture advanced enough to have crossed intergalactic space, is too big to be dodged. It has to be solved quickly and positively. Ideally it would involve us showing proof of good feeling by producing the survivor alive and well..."

O'Mara's voice hardened suddenly into an angry rasp, and he was so close behind Conway that the doctor could feel his breath on his neck.

"...Which brings us back to the patient here, the being which you are supposed to be treating."

"Look at me, Conway!"

Conway turned around, but only after insuring that Prilicla was still keeping a close watch. Angrily he wondered why everything had come to the boil at once instead of happening in a nice, consecutive fashion.

"At the first examination," O'Mara resumed quietly, "you fled to your room before we could make any headway. This looked like professional cold feet to me, but I was inclined to make allowances. Later, Dr. Mannon suggested a line of treatment which although drastic was not only

allowable but definitely indicated in the patient's condition. You refused to move. Then Pathology developed a specific which could have cured the patient in a matter of hours, and you balked at using even *that!*

Ordinarily I discount rumours and gossip in this place," O'Mara continued, his voice rising again, "but when they become both widespread and insistent, especially among the nursing staff who generally know what they're talking about medically, I have to take notice. It has become plain that despite the constant watch you have kept on the patient, the frequent examinations and the numerous samples you have sent to Pathology, you have done absolutely nothing for the being."

"It has been dying while you *pretended* to treat it. You've been so afraid of the consequences of failure that you were incapable of making the simplest decision

— "

"No!" Conway protested. That had stung even though O'Mara's accusation was based on incomplete information. And much worse than the words was the look on the Major's face, an expression of anger and scorn and a deep hurt that someone he had trusted both professionally and as a friend could have failed him so horribly. O'Mara was blaming himself almost as much as Conway for his business.

"Caution can be taken to extremes, Doctor," O'Mara said almost sadly. "You have to be bold, sometimes. If a close decision is necessary you should make it, and stick to it no matter what..."

"And what the blazes," asked Conway furiously, "do you *think* I'm doing?"

"Nothing!" shouted O'Mara. "Absolutely nothing!"

"That's right!" Conway yelled back.

"Respiration has ceased," Prilicla said quietly.

Conway swung round and thumbed the buzzer for Kursedd. He said, "Heart action? Mind?"

"Pulse faster. Emoting a little more strongly."

Kursedd arrived then and Conway began rattling out instructions. He needed instruments from the adjoining DBLF theatre and detailed his requirements. Aseptic procedure was unnecessary, likewise anaesthetics – he wanted only a

large selection of cutting instruments. The nurse disappeared and Conway called Pathology, asking if they could suggest a safe coagulant for the patient should extensive surgery be necessary. They could and said he would have it within minutes. As he was turning from the intercom, O'Mara spoke: "All this frantic activity, this window-dressing, proves nothing. The patient has stopped breathing. If it isn't dead it is as near to it as makes no difference, and you're to blame. Heaven help you, Doctor, because nobody here will."

Conway shook his head distractedly. "Unfortunately you may be right, but I'm hoping that it won't die," he said. "I can't explain just now, but you could help me by contacting Skempton and telling him to go easy on that alien colony. I need time, just how much of it I still don't know."

"You don't know when to give up," said O'Mara angrily, but went to the intercom nevertheless. While he was arranging a link-up Kursedd undulated in with an instrument trolley. Conway placed it convenient to the patient, then said over his shoulder to O'Mara. "Here is something you might think about. For the past twelve hours the air expelled from the patient's lungs has been free from impurities. It has been breathing but apparently not using its breath ,..."

He bent quickly, adjusted his stethoscope and listened. The heart-beats were a little faster, he thought, and stronger. But there was a jarring irregularity to them. Through the thick, almost solid growth which enclosed it the sounds were both magnified and distorted. Conway could not tell if the heart alone was responsible for

the noise or if other organic movements were contributing. This worried him because he didn't know what was normal for a patient like this. The survivor had, after all, been in an ambulance ship, which meant that there might have been something wrong with it in addition to its present condition...

"What are you raving about?" O'Mara broke in roughly, making Conway realise that he had been thinking aloud. "Are you saying now that the patient isn't sick...?"

Absently, Conway said, "An expectant mother can be suffering, yet not be technically ill."

He wished that he knew more of what was going on inside his patient. If the being's ears had not been completely covered by the growth he would have tried the

Translator again. The sucking, bumping, gurgling noises could mean anything.

"Conway... I" began O'Mara, and took a breath which could be heard all over the ward. Then he forced his voice down to a conversational level and went on, "I'm in touch with Skempton's ship. Apparently they made good time and have already contacted the aliens. They're fetching the Colonel now..." He broke off, then added, "I'll turn up the volume so you can hear what he says."

"Not too loud," said Conway, then to Prilicla, "How is' it emoting?"

"Much stronger. I detect separate emotions again. Feelings of urgency, distress and fear – probably claustrophobic – approaching the point of panic."

Conway gave the patient a long, careful appraisal. There was no visible movement. Abruptly he said, "I can't risk waiting any longer. It must be too weak to help itself. Screens, Nurse."

The screens were meant only to exclude O'Mara. Had the psychologist seen what was to come without fully knowing what was going on he would doubtless have jumped to more wrong conclusions, probably to the extent of forcibly restraining Conway.

"Its distress is increasing," Prilicla said suddenly. "There is no actual pain, but there are intense feelings of constriction..."

Conway nodded. He motioned for a scalpel and began cutting into the growth, trying to establish its depth. It was now like soft, crumbling cork which offered little

resistance to the knife. At a depth of eight inches he bared what looked like a greyish, oily and faintly iridescent membrane, but there was no rush of body fluid into the operative field. Conway heaved a sigh of relief, withdrew, then repeated the process in another area. This time the membrane revealed had a greenish tinge and was twitching slightly. He moved on again.

Apparently the average depth of the growth was eight inches. Working with furious speed Conway opened the covering growth in a total of nine places, spaced out at roughly equal intervals around the ring-like body, then he looked a question at Prilicla.

"Much worse now," said the GLNO. "Extreme mental distress fear, feelings of... of strangulation. Pulse is up, and irregular — there is considerable strain on the heart. Also it is losing consciousness again..."

Before the empath had finished speaking Conway was hacking away. With long, sawing, savage strokes he linked together the openings already made with deep, jagged incisions. *Everything* was sacrificed for speed. By no stretch of the imagination could what he was doing be called surgery, because a lumberjack with a blunt axe could have performed neater work.

Finished, he stood looking at the patient for three whole seconds, but there was still no sign of movement. Conway dropped the scalpel and began tearing at the growth with his hands.

Suddenly the voice of Skempton filled the ward, excitedly describing his landing on the alien colony and the opening of communications with them. He went on, "...And O'Mara, the sociological set-up is

weird, I've never heard of anything like it, or them! There are two distinct life-forms-"

"But belonging to the same species," Conway put in loudly as he worked. The patient was showing definite signs of life and was beginning to help itself. He felt like yelling with sheer exaltation, but instead he went on, "One form is the ten-legged type of our friend here, but without their tails sticking in their mouths. That is a transition-stage position only.

The other form is... is..." Conway paused to give the being now revealed before him a searching, analytical stare. The remains of the growth which had covered it lay about the floor, some thrown there by Conway and the rest which it had shaken off itself. He continued, "Let's *see*, oxygen-breathing, of course. Oviparous. Long, rod-like but flexible body possessing four insectile legs, manipulators, the usual

sense organ; and three sets of wings. Classification GKNM. Visual aspect something like a dragonfly.

I would say that the first form, judging by the crudely-developed appendages we noticed, performed most of the hard labour. Not until it passed the 'Chrysalis' stage to become the more dexterous, and beautiful, dragonfly form would it be considered mature and capable of doing responsible work. This would, I suppose, make for a complicated society..."

"I had been about to say," Colonel Skempton broke in, his voice reflecting the chagrin of one whose thunder has just been stolen, "that a couple of the beings are on their way to take care of the survivor. They urge that nothing whatever be done to the patient..."

At that point O'Mara pushed through the

screen. He stood gaping at the patient who was now engaged in shaking out its wings, then with a visible effort pulled himself together. He said, "I suppose apologies are in order, Doctor. But why didn't you *tell* someone...?"

"I had no clear proof that my theory was right," Conway said seriously. "When the patient went into a panic several times when I suggested helping it, I suspected that the growth might be normal. A caterpillar could be expected to object to anyone trying to remove its chrysalis'-, prematurely, for the good reason that such a course would kill it. And there were other pointers. The lack of food intake, the ring-like position with the appendages facing outwards — obviously a defence mechanism from a time when natural enemies threatened the new being inside the slowly hardening shell of the old, and

finally the fact that its expelled breath during the later stages showed no impurities, proving that the lungs and heart we were listening to had no longer a direct connection."

Conway went on to explain that in the early stages of the treatment he had been unsure of his theory, but still not doubtful enough in his mind to allow Mannon or Thornnastor to have their way. He had made the decision that the patient's condition was normal, or fairly normal, and the best course would be to do absolutely nothing. Which was what he had done.

"...But this is a hospital which believes in doing everything possible for a patient," Conway went on, "and I can't imagine Dr. Mannon, yourself, or any of the other people I know just standing by and doing nothing while their patient was apparently

dying on them. Maybe someone would have accepted my theory and agreed to act on it, but I couldn't be sure. And we just *had* to cure this patient, because its friends at that time were rather an unknown quantity..."

"All right, all right," O'Mara broke in, holding up his hands. "You're a genius, Doctor, or something. Now what?"

Conway rubbed his chin, then said thoughtfully, "We must remember that the patient was in a hospital so there must have been something wrong with it in addition to its condition. It was too weak to break out of its own chrysalis and had to have help. Maybe this weakness was its only trouble. But if it was something else, Thornnastor and his crowd will be able to cure it now that we can communicate and get its cooperation."

"Unless," he said, suddenly worried, "our earlier and misguided attempts to reassure it have caused mental damage." He switched on the Translator, chewed at his lips for a moment, then addressed the patient; "How do you feel?"

The reply was short and to the point, but in it were contained all the implications which gladden a worried doctor's heart.

"I'm hungry," said the patient.

The End